

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2020

I ask for your continued prayers for the church and for all of our schools as people sort out all that is involved with continuing, safely, the work of education for all. As far as prayer goes, I also ask that you don't stop there! In this tumultuous time, we live in, pray for our community and our country, as so many seek, with discernment, the best way for all to proceed safely.

Blessed be God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
And blessed be God's kingdom, now and forever. Amen.

Let's pray this together.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.

The Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

First Lesson

Ezekiel 18:1-4,25-32

The word of the Lord came to me: What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge"? As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Know that all lives are mine; the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine: it is only the person who sins that shall die.

Yet you say, "The way of the Lord is unfair." Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair? When the righteous turn away from their righteousness and commit iniquity, they shall die for it; for the iniquity that they have committed they shall die. Again, when the wicked turn away from the wickedness they have committed and do what is lawful and right, they shall save their life. Because they considered and turned away from all the transgressions that they had committed, they shall surely live; they shall not die. Yet the house of Israel says, "The way of the Lord is unfair." O house of Israel, are my ways unfair? Is it not your ways that are unfair?

Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, all of you according to your ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions; otherwise iniquity will be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.

The Response

Psalm 25:1-8

Ad te, Domine, levavi

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul;
my God, I put my trust in you; *
let me not be humiliated,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; *
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.
3 Show me your ways, O Lord, *
and teach me your paths.
4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, *
for you are the God of my salvation;
in you have I trusted all the day long.
5 Remember, O Lord, your compassion and love, *
for they are from everlasting.
6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; *
remember me according to your love
and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.
7 Gracious and upright is the Lord; *
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
8 He guides the humble in doing right *
and teaches his way to the lowly.

The Epistle

Philippians 1:21-30

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death--
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew.
Glory to you Lord Christ.

The Gospel

Matthew 21:23-32

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" And they argued with one another, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

"What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going to the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of the righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

Praise to you Lord Christ.

A Reflection

May the words written and the prayer of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Authority is an interesting word. We all assume we know what it means – just to put us all on the same page, the dictionary defines it as *the power to determine, adjudicate, or otherwise settle issues or disputes; jurisdiction; the right to control, command, or determine*. But we also carry our own cultural definition and belief about authority, also.

Authority is not something we always appreciate or respect. Authority is, unfortunately, often used in an inappropriate manner, (we seem to be seeing authority being misused quite often lately.) It is sometimes used to intimidate and to make people comply with the will of others. It seems to separate and make some people seem better than others in spite of what we are offered in Philippians this morning – “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.” In authority, people remain servants. If you read the dictionary definition again, you will notice that none of these negative meanings are part of the actual definition of the word, but they certainly apply to our cultural definition.

Authority *does* have the ability to upset the status quo, which is sometimes a good thing, and concern for maintaining the familiar may be on the minds of the chief priests and elders when they confront Jesus asking “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” In the context of the time, they were the authority and were, perhaps, a bit concerned about Jesus shifting that position of their power.

Jesus goes on to rather skillfully maneuver out of the question, showing that these authority figures do not comprehend the source of his authority to do what he does. The Chief Priests are aware of their tenuous position as they consider Jesus's question “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?”

This is a verbal trap for their authority as they consider “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘Of human origin,’ we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.” They then opt-out of this conundrum by responding “We do not know.”

Therein, they basically surrender their authority in the situation as Jesus continues offering “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things”

Their perception of authority is based on worldly things, while Jesus claims authority from another source, as did Johns. Jesus elaborates on this further in offering that the “tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” (a statement that will not appease their authority, either!) But it seems they listened, and they saw John's authority. Jesus offers “For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.”

They saw, they heard, they believed. This all makes it seem very simple, in a way. I have to admit, my own relationship with authority has not always been a simple acceptance of it. I always sought the room to ask questions, and I believe questions are OK with God.

In becoming a priest, part of my vow before the bishop, the congregation, and God was to say “Will you respect and be guided by the pastoral direction and leadership of your bishop?” My response was “I will”. This part of my vows came up a lot in my pre-ordination examination. I made the choice of this vow, realizing and admitting that I could accept his authority as long as there was room for questions. (So if he directed me to do something that I really didn’t understand, I could ask a question or two!)

Those more abusive elements of authority I mentioned earlier, have, unfortunately, been part of church history. We need to own that and recognize it for what it has done. At the same time, there are church authority figures that are much more invested in the authority of God than their own man-made and culturally reinforced authority.

For myself, I seek to accept the authority of God, but I also use my own discernment to see if it resonates with the authority of God on other matters. Good indicators of that resonance? Go back and read the baptismal creed again – an excellent place to start. The authority of God is not a thing that dwells in the dark to exercise its divine authority.

I’m going to date myself a bit here but bear with me. Do you remember the movie *Godspell*? It came out in 1973, and I loved it! The play and later movie was originally based on the Gospel of Matthew, and spending time with this Gospel this week made me remember how it was treated in the movie.

Basically, a large figure made out of construction pieces, ladders and metal comes out of the dark and asks the question of Jesus we hear in the text, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” In the exchange that follows, Jesus knocks over this figure, therein (symbolically) defeating the authority being represented. As Jesus is pulling it apart, we discover this “authority” is made up of people and empty drapes.

It was made by the authority of men, and not by God's authority.

Give some prayerful consideration to which authority you follow. The authority of culture and Empire is very different than the authority of the Lord.

Amen.

Let us now confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Praying together:

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,*

*and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Let us end by praying as our Lord Jesus Christ taught us – Pray this as you will, out loud or to yourself – just know that God hears you.

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.*

We will continue with the prayer of Spiritual Communion. This prayer was written by St. Alphonsus de Liguori. This prayer is now often used when the church is in a place of fasting from Communion, and I have heard this used in many of the on-line services being offered. We will be using this prayer in place of Communion when we regather in the future.

Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. I love you above all things, and long for you in my soul. Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. As though you have already come, I embrace you and unite myself entirely to you; never permit me to be separated from you. Amen.

After last week's vestry meeting it seems we are largely ready to resume meeting in person at the church. I have a little more homework to do on the needed protocol provided under the Bishops authority – expect a more formal announcement early next week. Know that I pray for all of you in this time of separation from each other.

Yours in Christ.
Dave+