First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

8/27/23

The Nature of Authority

Matthew 16:13-20 Amplified Bible

**13**Now when Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” **14**And they answered, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah, or [just] one of the prophets.” **15**He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” **16**Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed), the Son of the living God.” **17**Then Jesus answered him, “Blessed [happy, spiritually secure, favored by God] are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood (mortal man) did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. **18**And I say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build My church; and the gates of Hades (death) will not overpower it [by preventing the resurrection of the Christ]. **19**I will give you the keys (authority) of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind [forbid, declare to be improper and unlawful] on earth [e]will have [already] been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose [permit, declare lawful] on earth [f]will have [already] been loosed in heaven.” **20**Then He gave the disciples strict orders to tell no one that He was the Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed).

What I find interesting about this passage is the series of assumptions that are made, not just by the disciples, but by, as Jesus puts it, “People.” “Who do people say I am?” The disciples give a variety of answers based, I believe, on their own biases and opinions. Verse 14 reads, **14**And they answered, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah, or [just] one of the prophets.”

These responses are interesting because John the Baptist, Elijah and Jeremiah were all prophets that the Israelites believed had been sent by God to robustly confront the sins and evils of Kings and nations. In these responses, you hear a yearning on the part of “people,” for that type of leader; someone who would challenge the authority of the current crop of leaders and restore Israel to its former glory.

Jesus may have found it helpful to hear what other folks were saying about him, otherwise why ask the question? That said, I think he was more interested in hearing who the disciples thought he was.

Before I go on, let me give you a bit of context. Jesus has just had yet another confrontation with the Pharisees and the Sadducees, where these religious authorities had demanded that Jesus prove to them that he was indeed the Messiah, by providing them with a sign. In essence, put up or shut up, is how I image that conversation going. Jesus responds in Matthew 16:3a, by telling them, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.” And in the following verse, Jesus adds, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” So, he left them and departed. As an aside, the sign of Jonah is often interpreted to reference Jonah’s call for the Ninevites to repent. And it’s no wonder that Jesus and his followers were on the road again, given what he’s just said to those who claimed the authority to speak on God’s behalf.

So, Jesus has heard who the people have said he is and now he turns the question on the disciples. When he does, however, all you hear is crickets. I imagine some averted eyes and shuffling of feet among the disciples. That is, until Peter; brash, imperfect Peter, the one who always seems to have an opinion about everything, speaks up and testifies that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the son of the living God.

A+ Peter, you get to go to the head of the class. Jesus is happy with this answer, and tells Peter that not only is he blessed, but he is the rock upon which the church will be built and hell itself will not prevail against it.

Fun fact, this is the passage that became the rational for the formation of the Catholic Church. The idea that each successive Pope can trace his authority all the way back to Peter, is the fundamental belief upon which the entirety of the Catholic Church is based.

Setting aside, for the moment, whether or not the Catholics have it right, let’s talk about the word “Authority.” You may have noticed that it doesn’t appear in today’s reading. That’s because it was simply assumed that Jesus, being the Messiah, or the Anointed One, had already been granted authority by God to do what he was doing. Peter, in acknowledging that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, is also acknowledging that fact.

In hindsight, many people have looked at this passage and wrinkled their noses, because Peter was a supremely flawed human being. It seems odd that Jesus would use Peter in this manner, because, among other things, he knew that Peter would deny who and what Jesus was. But here, for a brief moment, Peter gets it right. And It was Peter’s faith that ultimately led Jesus to use Peter in this manner. Peter’s faith in the authority that Jesus had, was obviously not misplaced.

Fast forward two thousand years, and the meaning of the word authority hasn’t really changed. We understand, almost instinctively, that there are rules and laws that need to be obeyed and followed, whether we like them or not.

I was driving through Preston the other day and my lead foot got the better of me. Of course, I got pulled over for doing ten miles an hour over the posted speed limit. Needless to say, I wasn’t happy about it, especially since folks driving by were slowing down and gawking. Guess they don’t have much going on in Preston. I’ll admit, some words came out of my mouth that I can’t be repeated here, because they aren’t appropriate for use in the pulpit. All I will say is that the air in my truck turned bright blue. The fact is that the officer who pulled me over had me dead to rights. So, in spite of my personal feelings about the whole situation, I was polite and I paid the $90 fine.

That experience got me to thinking about the entire concept of authority. Particularly about how easy it can be for those who have authority to abuse it. The Preston cop was polite and professional, but was that just because I’m a white male? Was it solely because I didn’t argue or try to talk my way out of a situation of my own making? I’d like to think that if I had been a person of color, the outcome would have been the same, but given the news lately, I’m not really sure.

Because my mind works in weird and mysterious ways, I also started thinking about how authority is exercised, and often abused, within the church. Many churches use this passage to exercise their authority in a top down manner. But when that authority; the authority which ultimately comes from God, is misused, then we have a serious problem. What happens when the power that comes from achieving a high position within the Christian Church, goes to a leader’s head?

We’ve all witnessed, or experienced, situations where religious leaders say, “Jump,” and thousands, or even millions, of people say, “How high?” From a leader’s perspective, this can be pretty heady stuff and if the leader isn’t very careful, it can, and often does, lead to an abuse of his or her authority.

On the flip side, what happens when a religious leader says, “Jump,” and someone says, “why,” or “no?” We’ve all witnessed, or experienced for ourselves, what happens when we challenge leaders who have allowed their authority to go to their heads. We’ve all seen the damage that is caused by such actions. For many, that damage causes them to leave the church or give up their faith and belief in God entirely. And I strongly believe that this is something that these types of leaders will ultimately have to answer for.

What if Jesus, the Messiah, the Anointed One, had let his God given authority go to his head? What if Jesus had acted the way many of today’s religious leaders act? Would Peter’s testimony have been the same? It’s hard to say, but I believe that a testimony offered out of fear of retribution is no real testimony at all. And for those who have been given authority to lead God’s people, is that authority exercised for our own aggrandizement, or for the benefit of others? If those of us who have been given authority by God to lead and teach God’s people, if we exercise that authority in a manner that damages or destroys the faith of another, I believe we can no longer claim God’s backing or blessing.

Remember, it was Peter’s faith, not his fear, which prompted him to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah. And it was Peter’s faith, not his fear, that changed the world.

At the end of the day, will we worship in the church of love, or the church of law? Are we willing to challenge religious laws and rules that don’t line up with the teachings of Jesus, or not? Are we willing to stand up to those who use their God given authority in a way that God never intended? Do we believe that Jesus is the Messiah out of fear or faith? Something to think about. AMEN