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Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

POWER AND LOVE

Years ago, there was a published story regarding the church I served in Memphis. A retired police officer reported that years before he and his canine partner had been checking to see if the church building was secure one night when he noticed that the front door to the sanctuary was wide open. As the dog and the officer went in, they heard and then pursued the sound of running steps. As they followed through what was described as the winding corridors of the church, they heard some doors bang, but upon inspection, no one was found. When they came back through the sanctuary, the officer's flash light beam fell upon an old man wearing a preacher's robe. The officer moved to turn on the lights and when he did, there was no one there. According to the story, upon checking back with the church the next day, a deacon was showing the police officer around and there was a portrait of the founding pastor of the church, who supposedly was buried under the structure. The officer said that the person in the portrait was the same man who he had seen in the sanctuary the night before. Do you believe the story? Let me add a couple of details as you assess its credibility. The church building did not have winding corridors. There was no record of anyone being buried under it, certainly not the founding pastor, as that was not the church's original location. The story was in the National Enquirer and the person who submitted it was paid a fee for the story that wasn't even substantiated by accounts of the police dog.¹ It wasn't an Abington Ghost story, but this Memphis ghost story helped to sell copies of the tabloid, but it seems to lack much authority because it wasn't based in what was real and true.

To great acclaim, Jesus had taken a donkey ride into Jerusalem the Sunday before the Passover observance was to take place. Later in the week, he goes to the temple and is teaching a crowd of people there. For the temple leaders, he was about as welcome in that place of worship as would be a ghost. Jesus was on their

turf. Rather than attacking him with a police dog, the religious leaders used their words to attack. “Who gave you the authority to be doing these things?” Not only was Jesus teaching there; earlier, he had unsettled the practice of selling items to those who visited the temple. Perhaps they were expecting Jesus to say that he had studied under some great rabbi and as his top student, he should be allowed to teach in the temple. But instead of appealing to human authority, Jesus ups the ante, referring to heavenly authority in a question he asks of them. “Did John the Baptist’s ministry come from heaven or was it of human origin?” Those who had been listening to Jesus teaching were suddenly quite focused on whatever response the chief priests and elders would give. Their response seems to be calculated toward preserving their own aura of authority. They whisper to one another, “Since we didn’t follow John’s teachings, if we say he had heavenly authority, that will make us hypocrites. But if we openly reject John, we will invite the scorn of the people.” So, what begins as an attack on Jesus quickly becomes an exercise in damage control. Having been trapped in their own self-interest, they can only feign ignorance. “We do not know,” is their reply.

Jesus then tells a parable exploring the idea of heavenly authority even further. A man has two sons, who seem to say and do whatever they feel like. The man tells both of his sons to go work in the vineyard. One says, “No,” but then changes his mind and goes to work. The other says he will go, but for whatever reason, does not. Jesus asks the chief priests and elders which of the sons did the will of his father. They have to answer that the first did. Even if he was disobedient in the beginning, he ended up doing what he was supposed to do. In this story, there seems to be an emphasis on deeds over words. Now in my profession, talk is the coin of the realm. I deeply believe that words matter. But Jesus’ parable seems to indicate that faith that doesn’t result in faithful action is mere talk that loses its power. It is saying one thing and doing another. What we do is the best measure of what is in our hearts.

The religious leaders who challenged Jesus’ authority were so trapped in their own self-interest that not only did they not recognize heavenly authority in their midst, they had lost whatever heavenly authority they might have ever had. Jesus wasn’t challenging their authority as much as he was exposing what they clearly lacked so

they might regain it. It would have been interesting to see the look on the face of the religious leaders at that moment – they may have looked like they had just seen a ghost. But instead of admitting that they lacked heavenly authority, they got sadly authoritarian in their actions, and set about trying to turn this troublemaker into a ghost.

The authority that the church has had in our society has not vanished like a ghost, but it is certainly not what it once was. There are a variety of causes for that loss. Part of it has been because we have certain media interests that play up the most outrageous stories about certain fringe church leaders who declare that the end of the world will occur on a particular date or who say or do hateful things. Some of these things are beyond our control. However, part of our loss of authority is deserved, as the larger church structure has been very slow at times to embrace new ways in which God is working. Mainline denominations have at times been more focused on their own institutional needs than on the immediate needs of people around them and within them. There has been a lot of focus and energy going toward theological or structural disagreements instead of what seems to be the focus of Jesus' ministry. Some of our words can easily sound like mere talk, instead of that which leads to faithful action.

Over the period of the history of this congregation, societal expectations regarding church membership have changed. It is no longer the common expectation that someone should be a part of a church. I frankly welcome parts of this new reality, where the people who attend do so not to meet the expectations of others, but out of their own desire to be a part of a faith community. I like that people come here not to save face, but through what I hope is the motivation to connect with and serve God and neighbor. The goal of the church is not to return to its former place of authority within our society. We need not chase after the ghost of an authority of human origin. Rather, we long to live in ways that reflect a heavenly authority that comes through seeking God's will over our own. We rediscover the heavenly authority God places in the church through putting aside selfish ambition or conceit and dedicating ourselves to the same kind of service our Lord Jesus demonstrated in lovingly giving his all on behalf of others. There is heavenly authority in that. All over the world, there is a desperate need for a church that can

give up the love of power to live out the power of love. As God enables us to do so, we will begin to reflect something like the kind of authority that Jesus had. It will be based in what is real and what is true. It will show the powerful presence of the love of God. And there is nothing in heaven or on earth with any more authority than that.

¹ National Enquirer, "True Great Ghost Story," November, 1981.