

Authority

John 1:6-8.19-28

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

“Who are you?” “What do you have to say for yourself?” Have you ever been asked either one of those questions? How about this one “Who do you think you are?” or “Who told you, you could do that?” A lot of time when people ask you who you are, your first reaction is to say your name. I am Pastor Kirk... We could even answer “who do you think you are?” that same way. I think I am Pastor Kirk. But those second questions takes a little more answer. What do you say about yourself? What do you have to say for yourself? Who told you, you could do that? These questions take a little more answer, they demand an authoritative listing of credentials, history, background or maybe even a resume. Those questions are basically asking by what authority do you have the right to do what your doing?

Authority is an interesting thing. Many people try to earn authority their entire lives, but really it is something that can only be given. Others bestow authority upon you. People often have to give authority to someone for that person to have authority over them. For instance as a seminarian, we are given experience working in hospitals or other institutions. While in the hospitals I have sat with people who were hearing terminal news, who lost loved ones, who lost a child. I have held the hand of a 16 year old who was in a head on accident killing everyone in the other car. I held his hand as doctors pushed bones and tendons back into his body. I learned much in that time doing my field work, but one of the greatest things I learned was that as a pastor, I can go anywhere as long as I look like I belong. I wear the collar because it gives me the identification as clergy. I learned that if I walked into a room, with my collar on, instantly people were giving me authority, because they knew what I was about and what I was there to do. I found that in the hospital, as long as I did what I was supposed to do, and was respectful of where I am, people would bestow authority upon me freely welcoming me into the most tire of circumstances and into their personal lives and their emotions, simply because I held the title pastor and had a collar on. That’s the gift authority people give.

In our Gospel text today John has been given authority. But not from a seminary school of theology. Instead his authority comes from God and the people of Judah acknowledge it. John didn’t have to wear the black shirt and the collar tab to preach. He didn’t even speak like a normal preacher speaks, but the people acknowledged his authority, showing him respect and honor as a man of God. They were a people looking for hope and John came and spoke to them of hope. The people were looking for the fulfillment of the prophecies, and John came and

spoke to them of the fulfillment of the prophecies. The people were looking for the sign that God was about to act, and John comes to them telling them that the Lord is Coming. John just went out into the wilderness of the Jordan river and began to baptize those seeking baptism and preach to those who would listen and the people responded. He didn't shove his way into a temple. He didn't list his resume as a son of a priest and a man of the law and of the prophets. He didn't try demanding that people give him respect and authority. He simply did his job and people responded giving him the authority and respect of a Godly man.

But the tension in our Gospel reading begins because while John was getting authority, the religious temple leaders were losing authority. They had lifted up the laws and their power before the people for too long. They had built themselves up as the ones due respect and honor, simply because they demanded it. And when they see John being given authority and respect, and as Mark's Gospel told us last week, people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people from Jerusalem were coming out to be baptized by John, well they know they have to put a stop to it.

These religious leaders must have decided they needed to protect their authority, they try to clamp down on this upstart itinerant preacher who is all the rage. They send out some experts of the law and of the prophets to seek John and discredit him in front of the people. You almost have to feel sorry for these religious leaders – over and over again, first John and later Jesus they send person after person out to test these men of God and they are made foolish in front of the crowds over and over again.

So back to our text, we have these Levites and priests who are sent out to poke holes in John's authority. They come and ask him that simple question – Who are you? Apparently a lot of people had been thinking that John might be the messiah? The Christ. But he denies that he is. The Jews had been waiting for the coming messiah and are waiting to this day. Many rumors over all that time have circulated as to what this messiah would be like, what he would look like, what he would do. Most under Roman persecution were looking for a mighty army general or king who would lead the armies of Israel as conquerors over all the world. Some expected a supernatural figure flowing straight from God. There was no one set detail understanding on what the messiah would be like, but all had their hopes. So it is natural that people were hoping that John might be the one. And that is the tactic the religious lawyers try are you the Messiah? Are you the one? But he denies it. John's role was to point to someone greater, he doesn't claim to be anyone that they could attack and denounce. He just simply is the one pointing to someone greater.

If he is not the messiah then they figure perhaps he thinks he is Elijah? Elijah they believed would be coming back to point out the day of the coming of the Lord. Elijah had been taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot and would return on day to herald and prepare the world for the messiah. This concept was taken so seriously that many Jews followed the traditional law that said that Elijah would come back to settle all disputes, bring friendships together again, mend families that we estranged and decide who was clean or unclean. Even today at Passover holidays, the jews will set an extra place setting for Elijah and part of this 3000 year tradition is asking the youngest child to open the door during the dinner to invite Elijah in just in case he is coming back. That has a lot of hope and respect and authority for Elijah. But of course we know that John the baptized was not Elijah. And he says he is not to the priests and the people.

But they are not happy with that answer, so they ask again, then who are you? Are you the prophet? They don't identify some one in particular but it is thought by many that they were referring to Moses' line in Deuteronomy 18:15: where Moses said, "The Lord you God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people." The Jews were waiting for this prophet who would be like Moses and save God's people once again. But John says NO!

But the religious lawyers and priests are persistent, who are you then, what do you say about yourself? Ah HA, now they have asked the question that demands a bigger answer than just who are you. What do you have to say for yourself. And John answers it. Remember earlier John the Baptist entire mission is to point out the one is coming, the greater one. And that is the answer he gives, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord. The one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie even his sandals.

John admits that he is simple the servant, even lower than a servant who would untie sandals of the master, he says he is that low of a servant compared to the one who is coming. John is given authority by God and the people see it, but John gives ultimate authority to the one who is coming the one to whom he points and has been preparing for – to the coming messiah. John is given the authority to become that witness of testifying to the one who is coming.

And the real point is that each of us likewise are given that same authority. We don't have to be the messiah, or the great Elijah or even like Moses. But we can stand and point others to Jesus. To see God in the world. In our baptisms we are given that same authority that John had, to go and make the path straight and the way clear. To share the Gospel and the news of Jesus' kingdom that has come and is coming. So when people ask who you are you can say you're a voice in the wilderness, prepare for the coming of the Lord. May you always

12/14/2008

4

remember that you are a person of God's family, cherished and valued and essential in all ways. May you be that witness of the Lord, today and always. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.
AMEN.