

**“Let This Mind Be in You,” 17 Pentecost, Oct. 1, 2017, FPC
Marshfield** Texts: Ex. 17:1-17, Ps. 78:1-4,12-16 Phil. 2:1-13,
Matthew 21:23-32

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus is teaching in the temple. He has entered Jerusalem in a procession, riding on a donkey, with the crowds waving branches and placing their cloaks on the ground as he rode into town. This is what we call Palm Sunday, so today’s lesson took place during Holy Week. He had already shown his displeasure with those changing money and selling sacrifices in the temple, what we call “the cleansing of the temple.”

The chief priests and elders of the temple were already feeling threatened by his teaching and they were looking for a way to trap him. In rabbinic fashion they started a debate with him, asking, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” So Jesus fired back with his own question: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?” The temple authorities knew they were trapped. If they answered, “from heaven” then Jesus would want to know why they didn’t believe John. Since John was popular with the crowds, they would be

infuriated if they answered, “of human origin.” So they passed the buck, saying, “We do not know.” So Jesus also refused to answer their question about his authority.

He then told a story about two sons, one of which refused his father’s request to work in the vineyard, but later went anyway, and the other, who said he would comply, but then didn’t show up. Jesus then declared that the tax collectors and prostitutes sometime have a better understanding of the Kingdom of God than the temple authorities.

This exchange has some things to say to us today. Church authorities still insist that they have authority over many things. For example, in our tradition, only ordained “teaching elders” or “ministers of word and sacrament” have the right to preside at the communion table or baptize people. We have to graduate from seminary, pass ordination exams, and be approved by the presbytery before we can be ordained. There are some exceptions, such as our commissioned lay pastors, who, after some training, will be permitted by presbytery to preside at the sacraments in the church where they are serving. The Presbyterian system

ordains elders and deacons and gives them equal votes at presbytery meetings. Presbytery tries to balance the number of elder-delegates to the number of ministers, so that decisions are more democratic. Our system is the only one that actually ordains elders and deacons. However, achieving a good balance requires constant attention.

We need some sense of “decency and order in the way we do things, so not all of this declaration of authority is bad. I have seen situations where people decided they had the authority to control a local church without any credentials at all. That can cause conflict.

In the early middle ages, the Roman church sought to control the other versions of Christianity that had developed on the fringes of Europe, such as the Celtic, the Gallic (French), and the Spanish traditions. Augustine developed the theory of original sin, which became a way to control people and make them dependent on the church and the empire. Truth was to be distributed from above. The Celtic Pelagius was considered a heretic because he taught that, though sin is real, people were made in the image of God and were bearers of an ancient wisdom and unspeakable dignity. People who

believed that were not easily cowed by external power and authority. Pelagius taught that when we look into the face of a newborn child, we are looking into the face of God freshly born among us. Because of our sin, nature and creation are sacred but deeply wounded and in need of grace. Even when I studied church history, Pelagius was generally condemned for his heresy. More detail on the teachings of Celtic Christianity can be found in John Philip Newell’s book, [Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation](#). He is a minister of the Church of Scotland and often teaches at Ghost Ranch and other conference centers of the PC(USA). For a time he was Warden of Iona, in the Western Isles of Scotland.

So who is Jesus for us? Where does he get his authority? Perhaps the great hymn from Philippians 2:6-11 helps us to understand. This hymn was probably borrowed by Paul from older sources and added to his letter. Since the letter was written in the 50s, the hymn probably dates back nearly to Jesus’ life. It tells the story of the incarnation: God humbled himself and came to earth in the form of a human being, even suffering the worst death imaginable, the crucifixion. This is how we know what God is like. God

became fully human in Jesus, who showed us the way to be the kind of human being that God calls us to be. God also knows what our suffering is like and is with us in both our joys and sorrows. When Jesus died on the cross, God vindicated him and raised him to new life. This is not just life after death, but abundant life here and now. Our baptism is a symbol and metaphor for dying and rising with Christ, as Paul tells us in Romans 6:3-11. When we go down into the waters, we die with Christ, and when we come up out of the water, we are raised to new life.

The “kenosis” hymn in Philippians explains that after Jesus died on the cross, God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name. We are called to confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

So Jesus gets his authority from God, not from the Jewish temple religion or from the Roman Church, or from the Reformation churches. Since this authority comes from God, it sometimes calls into question the authority of any earthly institution, whether it be the church, the empire, the government, or any other human source. There are times when the authority of God and the authority of human

institutions come into conflict. In the Roman Empire, Caesar was Lord. When Christians declared that “Jesus is Lord,” they were also saying that Caesar is not.

This became important to Christians in Germany in the 1930s when Hitler tried to bring the church under the control of the Nazi regime. That is when Christians of the Confessing Church, such as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote the Barmen Declaration, declaring the Lordship of Jesus and no other. As happened in the Roman Empire, Christians such as Bonhoeffer became martyrs for their refusal to give their full obedience to the Nazi empire.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It is a day in which we remember that there are Christians throughout the world declare that “Jesus is Lord,” in many languages. We share together in the Lord’s Supper. In our tradition, all are welcome at the table, including children and people from other churches. We have heard our scriptures read in Chinese and Spanish, representative of the many languages used in Christian worship. We are singing hymns from the world church. Our communion table is covered with cloth from Peru. I am wearing a stole from Guatemala.

The communion prayer that we use is partially taken from the “Wee Worship Book” of the Iona community in Scotland. It reminds us that all are welcome, whether we are regular participants, those who come occasionally, or those who are almost never here. Jesus loves us all. We are all called to the welcome table. Jesus is really the one who presides at the table and shows his love for all.

We also receive the Peacemaking and Global Witness offering, one of the four special offerings of the PC(USA). We are reminded in the letter to the Ephesians that Jesus came to proclaim a peace that is universal. As followers of Christ, our call to witness and work for peace begins in our own neighborhoods and extends to the ends of the earth.

It will be used partly in our own community for peacemaking activities, and partly in our presbytery and national church, to proclaim our witness that God creates each of us in his own image, that we are called to welcome the stranger, that we are called to exclude no one from our community. Jesus recognized that even the tax collectors and sinners are welcome.

