

Authority Issues

Matthew 10:26-39

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Father's Day, June 21, 2020

Prayer: O God, whose ways we do not understand. We hesitate to speak up for what we know in our hearts to be true. We fear one another and are frightened by judgment. Break through our limited perceptions. Reassure us and help us to believe in the truth you have written upon our hearts...

When our son went off to first grade, such a huge step in development, he was excited to learn, enthusiastic about his class, confident that he was ready to take on everything that school had to offer. At home he was a busy child, interested in everything that could be built out of every kind of building material, railroad tracks, marble shoots, Legos, blocks of all kinds, we learned the names of all the trucks and dinosaurs, the names of their eras. He was, and is, busy and happy by nature, and easy to get along with. It came as a shock to us when his teacher pulled me aside after school one day to tell me she was having trouble with him in the classroom. ...what?? Seems he had been correcting the teacher, when she was wrong. Which apparently happened with enough frequency that it was getting on her nerves...

I didn't know what to say. While I understood her frustration... it would have been easier for all of us if she could have managed to be less wrong during the course of a day. He had a keen sense of right and wrong and no filter developed yet about when to call it out. He began losing respect for her, she began losing patience with him. That whole year was a family project to keep this dynamic from getting out of control. Not good...

Authority issues are everywhere. Jesus was one who deeply challenged the authorities of his day. This scripture is a good reminder for me. Our culture is divided in a lot of ways right now, there are dividing voices and my nature is to try to bring people together to find common ground. Jesus is cracking the door and asking us to re-think the costs of social harmony.

With these words:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household."¹

With these words, we get a look at the costs of discipleship for Matthew's community. This is in a section of Matthew which is often called "the discipleship discourse" which we will be looking at

next week as well. Discipleship is a journey that includes lifelong learning and reflection. When this gospel was written, just being a follower of Jesus was pulling families apart. And while I certainly don't celebrate families being pulled apart, Jesus is reminding us that there is a time and a place for drawing a line and going our separate ways. Sometimes the costs of staying together, getting along, going with the flow begin to feel more like enabling wrong behavior, silence can look like support for injustice in certain contexts.

I think no one made this point more eloquently than Archbishop Desmond Tutu when he said during the time of Apartheid in South Africa: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

A number of voices are suggesting now that the United States could learn a lot from South Africa's **truth and reconciliation** process as we enter this summer of pandemic and protest: the legacy of slavery that we all have inherited if we live here... again, we're being asked to reconsider its implications for real people... South Africa made room to tell the story of injustice, they invited everyone into dialogue about it. Not that it was resolved, but it gave them language to use to talk about it. Naming truth, lifting up injustice does not subvert authority, if the authority is a good one, naming injustice strengthens the social fabric for everyone.

On this father's day we are celebrating fathers, a great American tradition, and I hope that you have fathers in your life or father figures for whom you are grateful today.

Part of growing up for every son is to take issue with his father, for every daughter to push against the example set by her mother. While this does not feel good in the moment for the parents, it is a good sign. They're growing, they're thinking for themselves, they've noticed their parent, and they have ideas of their own about the future they see.

Jesus said he did not bring peace, but a sword. In this same discourse he said that God's care extends to the smallest living things. His eye is on the sparrow... and maybe on the Legos, the marbles, the building blocks, the small words said and unsaid. His eye is on the injustice, and the way things develop.

Give yourself the room you need to be a disciple, to claim and speak your truth, his eye is on the important things about you, the truth you carry in your heart.

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¹ Matthew 10:31-36, Holy Bible; New Revised Standard Version