

September 27, 2020
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By what authority?

Jesus was asked by chief elders and priests by what authority are you doing these things?

By what authority are you changing the rules of religion?

By what authority are you preaching and teaching?

By what authority do you have people following you and listening to your teaching?

This is an honest question. The intent for the question wasn't pure. They were annoyed and frustrated that Jesus kept telling people that up is down and left is right, and they really wanted to know where in the heck he came from. By what authority?

This is why we have proper order in the ELCA. We also want to know, by what authority? When we first started our partnership with New Life, I had a similar question for Pastor Tom. I asked it in a different way, but I wondered by what authority he has to lead a congregation. The way I asked Pastor Tom the question was a little snooty. I asked him what seminary he went to and where he got his MDiv. For me, that is an authority. Pastor Tom took a few classes at a theological school but does not have an MDiv, yet he is the pastor of New Life, Norridge. I wanted to know what authority gave him permission to be a faith leader. He got the authority from his community, from other pastors that saw faithful leadership skills in him, and he gets his authority from his parishioners. But this is different than the way the ELCA likes to think about pastoral authority. We like our pastors to have an MDiv, a four-year master's degree that includes three different internships. We like our pastors to be ordained through the ELCA, a different process than the degree process where we have many hoops and meetings and papers to write and so, so much to prove our theology and ability before we are given authority through ordination. It is a long process and a lot of work. I actually have some empathy for these chief elders and priests. They probably studied for years. They probably have decades of work under their belt, and now, this radical man is walking around challenging their teachings? By what authority?

And you all, Jesus is tired. Jesus is so close to the cross. He is about to get this question thrown in his face by Pontius Pilot and will be forced to carry his own lynching tree they call a cross to the place they will hang him until he dies. They will mock his authority by placing a sign that says "king of the jews" above his lynching tree of a cross. By what authority do you say these things? He has enough authority to make those with the power nervous and want to kill him.

By what authority was Beronna Taylor killed in her own home while sleeping? By what authority were the police officers that shot her acquitted? By what authority does a president have to state weeks before a national election that the results don't matter, that we can't trust them? By what authority does the senate decide one set of rules for a Supreme Court appointment in one setting but the exact opposite decision in the same setting four years later? By what authority do we live in a pandemic that keeps us apart but we lose our own autonomy to decide what is best for our own health and the health of our family when we are being told that the economy

still needs to function even though 200,000 people died in six months. By what authority are these decisions made. By whose authority do we live?

You all, I'm exhausted. Most weeks over the past year or two, I said at some point in my sermon that it was a hard week. It has been a hard year, and I am exhausted. My husband doesn't want to be teaching high school students physics over a computer. My kids don't want to be home all the time and not interact with friends face to face. We don't want to worship by watching a video over Zoom. It is hard. It is exhausting. And it is making us have some big emotions, especially this week. I'm going to say it again, it was a hard week. It was a hard month. It was a hard year. And it is going to continue to be hard. We are 31 days from a stressful election day. We are almost 200 days from the start of the lock down in March when everything in our world changed overnight. We are in a holding pattern, it feels like, and people are getting angry and antsy.

A lot of people are wondering about authority right now. Who has the authority to tell us that staying home is safe? Who has authority to decide who needs to be at work or school, and who does not? Who has authority to share the research on Covid and share timelines for a vaccine? It seems there is a mix of both no authority or skirting authority and seeking too much authority in areas where those with the actual authority are having their voices squashed. It is hard to know who to listen to, who to trust, and what to do.

I had quite a few friends reach out to me this week because they are at the end of their rope. I had a number of people tell me that there is too much darkness in the world right now and they are losing hope for the future. I get it. I have moments of it too. I get tired, and I shut down for a day here and there, and that's me taking care of myself. But sometimes you just have to keep going; you just have to make the next decision. You have to do the things you don't want to do (remote learning or remote worship anyone?) even when you are exhausted. The schools teach it to our kids as grit. Let me tell you, I think we have grit in spades now after this past year. When my friends reached out to me, I went for walks with a few, and others I just spoke with on the phone. But the conversations always went the same. The world is too hard right now, and there are too many needs to meet them all. Family needs, work needs, personal needs, spiritual needs, physical needs, romantic needs... and each one seems too hard to take care of, especially this week it seemed. Everyone seems to be looking for an authority figure to tell them what to do and how best to survive life right now.

As I spoke with my friends, I realized something. I have the same despair and concerns, but I realized that I have not lost hope. I can still see the light in the darkness. This doesn't mean that I am a Pollyanna kind of person. If anything, I live in reality - fully aware of challenges. It does mean however, that there is something that I have in me that is helping me during this trying year, and that is my faith.

Now, hear me out. I know it can be cheesy to hear a pastor say that it is her faith that gets her through her hard times. I mean, how cliché. But really, I know this—beside my ample amounts of grit—is what is allowing me to wake up each day looking forward to what the day will bring instead of dread over what the next news story will be. I live in this world, and I pay attention to the news, I talk to people about what is stressing me. But big picture, I know that I am God's and that Jesus is with me. I live my life by Jesus' authority. I told my friends,

after listening to their struggles and seeing myself in so many of their struggles, that I understand the struggle and the feeling of dread, that I have it from time to time too. I stress that in my job I am forced to find the good news each week. Every week I have to take three Bible readings and find the hope, find how God is pointing us to the kingdom, and figure out how to love harder than I ever loved before. This is a gift and a blessing. Each week I am forced to look at what I experienced, what we as a country experienced, and figure out how God was at work during the week. By what authority is God still working in this broken world?

And you all, I saw so much this week. One friend told me about a fundraiser she set up so she and a few friends could help someone move out and get their own apartment so they no longer had to live with an abusive partner. There was a baptism at the church yesterday. Ziya Jean, Linda Jenkins' great-granddaughter, joined the family of God yesterday, and let me tell you, she is a force of light and joy who is going to do amazing things in this world - I see it in her. Yesterday some of us joined at the church, and we passed out over 300 paper bags asking our neighbors to care for each other and support St. Cyprian's Food Pantry. I see families forming school pods to support one another in both work and school when it is all remote. I see adults having conversations about how to make trick or treating safe so kids can still enjoy the holiday and be safe. There are good things happening. We are taking care of each other. We are following the commandment of love your neighbor, because, we have to. If this year of hardship is teaching us anything, it is that we are in this together. We are our brothers' keepers. We have to look out for the oppressed because no one else will. And guys, Jesus gave us this authority. By what authority can he do all those things? Teach? Heal? Bless? Feed? He does it by God's authority, and so do we. We do this through the mission of the church, to share the good news, to love our neighbors, and to baptize people into God's family of unconditional love.

The church's mission is predicated on Jesus wielding "all authority." This is not a sharing or granting of authority as much as it is a call to full submission and obedience. As the father of the next parable states simply: "Son, go and work in the vineyard today" (Matthew 21:28). This is the week for churches to reflect on the ways they compete for authority and power, and to envision prayerfully where the relinquishing of authority and power must take place. Whether we compete with fellow parishioners, our own pastors, "rival" churches, or non-church entities, such competition reflects our *own* obstinate rejection of *Jesus'* absolute authority. Are we "making disciples" of Christ who embody Christ's transformation and reclamation of the world, or are we "making disciples" of a merely human institution that fights for territory in the world?