

Where No One Has Gone

God and I have been tussling over this sermon. Our topic is authority. I suspect God has enjoyed it. My plan was to proclaim the authority of God. I believe it. I believe God has power and control over all. I believe if God chooses to do or deny God can. There are times when I think it is great to say that everything is in God's hands, yet as greatly as I believe in the authority and power of God, I also know through each part of Wesley's Quadilateral, Scripture, reason, experience and tradition, that God does not micro-manage. God does not impose power and authority, God does not negate the gift of free-will nor the impact of a world which God has allowed to be free.

Authority - one General I worked with often said, is best granted and not claimed. Having authority is one thing, having obedience to authority is quite another. This has been true since the creation of the world, for the Bible tells us that after creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing God commanded was: "Don't." "Don't what?" Adam replied "Don't eat the forbidden fruit." God said.

"Forbidden fruit? We got forbidden fruit? Hey Eve! We got forbidden fruit!" "No way!"

"Yes way!" "DON'T EAT THAT FRUIT!" Said God. "Why?" "Because I am your Father and I said so!" said God, wondering why he hadn't stopped after making elephants. A few minutes later God saw his kids having an apple break.

When authority is not looked at through the lens of power or obedience, then whatever is seen as an authority figure, or the ultimate authority figure, is often seen as the imposer of punishment. Rev. Richard Fairchild tells about a story that appeared years ago in the Christian Reader. It was called "Priceless Scribbles." It concerns a father who touched his child's life in an unexpected way. A young boy watched as his father walked into the living room. The boy noticed that his younger brother, John, began to cower slightly as his father entered. The older boy sensed that John had done something wrong. Then he saw from a distance what his brother had done. The younger boy had opened his father's brand new hymnal and scribbled all over the first page with a pen. Staring at their father fearfully, both brothers waited for John's punishment. Their father picked up his prized hymnal, looked at it carefully and then sat down, without saying a word.

Books were precious to him; he was a minister with several academic degrees. For him, books were knowledge. What he did next was remarkable, says the author of this story. Instead of punishing his brother, instead of scolding, or yelling, his father took the pen from the little boy's hand, and then wrote in the book himself, alongside the scribbles that John had made. Here is what that father wrote: "John's work, 1959, age 2. How many times have I looked into your beautiful face and into your warm, alert eyes looking up at me and thanked God for the one who has now scribbled in my new hymnal. You have made the book sacred, as have your brother and sister to so much of my life." "Wow," thought the older brother, "This is punishment?"

The punishment sometimes fits the "crime" and sometimes doesn't, yet the consistence or correlation of the punishment in relation to the disobedience is neither the role nor measure of authority any more than power does. Looking at today's Scripture passages does show that God has authority over things which are impossible by the norms of humanity or the natural world. I understand that it was only because God said so that Abraham and Sarah, old in age and unable to have a child in the normal course of their lives for whatever reason, had the son who was named Isaac, which means laughter. I understand that I mind can't totally rap around this story of God in and as 2 men, or how

Abraham knew they were no ordinary men. Just as I know that we are often challenged to look at our understanding of authority and of what it means to be the church and seek where God is leading and what God has to say about our current reality.

Proclaiming God's authority also calls us to acknowledge and name that God is God not only of power and authority, yet more so a God of love and wonder. We will resist any authority when we only feel it chaffing against our free will, our self desire. What is asked of us in order to honor God as the authority in our lives will feel like punishment unless we ground ourselves and our thinking in the truth that all God does, God does in love and from a great desire for humanity to experience God's best. We will experience great heartache, and crises of faith, if we do not work out our salvation with enough fear and trembling to look past seeing God's power and authority as something which we can call down or that will work to bring about that which we desire and/or are unwilling to work to bring about. Prayer, and the purpose and power of prayer, is one area where at times the church has misrepresented God's authority. Who has not either said or thought "if God wants it to be it will be" when facing a challenging situation individually or as a part of the greater whole. Who has not thought or said that when a situation of ill health or other despair strikes and then dissipates, God's power and authority has been shown.

There are times when God intervenes in human life and created world in such a way that all "natural" orders and expectations are few and far between. Of all the birth stories Scripture contains only 2 out of millions is the case, this story of Isaac's and the story of Jesus. The call of the church is not simply to proclaim God's authority, but also an understanding of the complexness of faith and the mystery of God. The call of the church is to show that believing in the authority of God is best responded to by commitment and submission, not by attempts to claim or control.

In proclaiming the authority of God as authority that is power, but not imposed; law and commitment; but not always with what seems to be just punishments or rewards, and that God's authority must be discerned amid the voices of the world and people we encounter, we should also proclaim that we are called to be workers who bring about the harvest of the goodness of God. That is the power of the second reading, and more so the power seen in the life of Jesus. Our claims that the authority of our lives and our common life together, is grounded only and always in God, are shown to be true when we practice self denial, reflection and examination, and concern for others in radical and continuous ways. This is also when we meet God and grow in grace. Like the authority of God, living as those bearing the name of Jesus The Christ is not imposed upon us, but offered as an option for our free wills. It is a step by step, a true working out, giving over of self. We are not only kin to, we are much like Adam and Eve, we are given a world where opportunity and temptation arrive with each passing moment, asking if we will say "yes Lord" or "we've got forbidden fruit!" It is about trusting that God loves so greatly that God allows us to scribble over God's creation and still sees us as beloved.

From this foundation, we are bidden to "take thee the authority". As the church all that we do, the attitudes we display, the ways that we face blessing and adversity, the willingness to invite God to examine our hearts and awaken our spirits, and our priorities and purpose, we do in the name and therefore in the authority of God.