



In Which Authority Do You Stand?



A Sermon By
Ms. Anna Broadbent

October 1, 2017
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/2017-10-01-AB.mp3>.

In Which Authority Do You Stand?

Ms. Anna Broadbent
Grace Episcopal Church
The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
October 1, 2017

According to an African Proverb power is like an egg; if it's held too tightly, it breaks, and if it's held too loosely, it will slip from grasp. Looking around our world today, I wonder, is anyone else in the mood for an omelet? I feel like we are living in a world in which power and authority are being handled so carelessly that the ground is covered with broken eggs as far as the eye can see. How are your feet feeling? Are they raw from all the egg shells? The abuse of power and authority in this world and country is utterly exhausting and frankly a waste of perfectly good eggs.

While this exhaustion continues to settle in to our bones, our Gospel message reminds us that this is nothing new. There have always been power struggles and conflict among those in perceived authority. In our passage today the chief priests and the elders approached Jesus in the temple, clutching their carton of eggs dangerously tightly and stated, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" In this interaction the chief priests and the elders were attempting to trap Jesus. They were trying to build a case against him to bring back to higher levels of authority... why? Because their authority was being challenged by Jesus' teachings and behavior and it was causing their own power with the people to slowly start to disintegrate in the palms of their hands.

With that in mind, let's do a little exploration of authority in the context of our Gospel today. We've got two sets of authority in play; we've got the earthly authority of the chief priests and elders as well as the God given authority of Jesus. Scholars have some dispute about the levels of priests within the Jewish tradition during Jesus' time. The High Priest, who was the highest Jewish authority under the Roman Empire, was appointed by Herod and his successors. These individuals needed to be from specific noble families. The authority of the High Priest was essentially given by birth into the appropriate family as well as by the choice of the Roman Empire. Chief priests share a similar authority, they must be able to trace their origins to the family of Levi and have an "impeccable" genealogy. It is likely that the chief priests held the highest post within the temple.

Jesus' authority comes in a very different way. First, off, we know that he did not come from an "impeccable" genealogy and certainly was not approved by the Roman Empire. Jesus' authority, as we know from scripture, came from directly from God. At the end of Matthew chapter 28 after Jesus has resurrected from the dead, Jesus came to his disciples and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Jesus' authority does not come from a place of privilege or birth line but from God. As the Son of God, Jesus has the authority to engage in the exact behaviors that the chief priests are challenging him on: to forgive sins, to heal the paralytic, to heal on the Sabbath, to heal the hemorrhaging woman and the list could go on.

The main difference between Jesus' authority and the chief priests' authority is that Jesus' authority is primarily focused on bringing equality among people, about healing those who are sick, about sitting with the outsider and about bringing those who are in any kind of poverty to a place of wholeness. The chief priests' power and authority is invested in the maintenance of the status quo and the preservation of the status of the elite.

What's interesting in this passage is the role that the crowd plays. A couple of chapters previously when Jesus healed the paralytic the story ends with a powerful statement "When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to human beings" (9:8). In our passage today when the chief priests and elders are debating their answer to Jesus' question about John's baptism, they basically choose not to answer stating "We do not know" because they were afraid of the crowd. It's clear that the chief priests and elders' authority was vulnerable. It was vulnerable to

the movement of the people. If the people stopped trusting in the systems and the empires that fed the authority of those in power, their power would be lost. This, we all know is dangerous. What happens when those in authority feel their power slipping away or may I dare say, being distributed equally in a truly just manner among all people? Sadly, there is one very obvious answer. When power and authority are threatened it typically leads to violence. Jesus challenged the authority of the Roman Empire and he was murdered for it. This has been proven time and time again throughout history. This type of violence is as result of a threat of an individual or group who believes and have been treat in a way that reinforces this notion, they were inherently created to have more authority and power based upon the family they were born into, in the case of the chief priests, or most obvious in this country right now, the color of their skin their born with. These notions of authority are unstable and have weak groundings compared to God's authority which has a firm foundation in truth, justice and the inherent believe that every human being is equally powerful simply because they were made in the image of our creator God. Because this authority is so vulnerable to attack, it must be protected with all of one's might. While it may not seem like it, these earthly authorities are hanging by a thread. It is the power of the crowd that can snip the thread with confidence that it is God's authority that gives us our worth and identity. The strength of the crowd, which it has done for years, can also reinforce that authority with steal making it harder and harder to cut and break down.

My friends, this has been an extremely difficult year with regards to authority. On a weekly basis we are seeing the backlash of violence as a result of systems that have been oppressing others with a false sense of authority for hundreds of years, being challenged. For many who have been taught to believe that they have a higher level of authority because of the color of the skin, when society begins to move towards a space of equity, one can feel threatened. This is why Charlottesville makes sense, this is why the resurgence of visible white supremacy makes sense. It is because the system of oppression that upholds that a person's worth or value is depended upon the color of their skin is being severely challenged and for those being challenged, violence (physically, emotionally and spiritually) is the only response left to protect that misguided sense of authority. This is why individuals taking a knee during the national anthem is causing so much backlash, because deep down it is a threat, which I find ironic since kneeling is often a sign of humility and respect. Kneeling is what children are trained to do when someone is hurt on the soccer field. Kneeling is what people do when they are knighted, or confirmed, or ordained. Kneeling is what some people choose to do when they desire to commit themselves in marriage to another. Most importantly, especially here at Grace, kneeling, in body or spirit, is what we do when we receive the Eucharist together.

After the Eucharist today we will be sent out into the world as Disciples of Christ and we will rejoin the crowds. As Christian members of the crowds, those very crowds who had so much influence over the chief priests, what is our responsibility? Our responsibility is quite simple. We are called to "Be Not Afraid" and to stand in the authority that Jesus has given us, an authority and worth that no one can touch. An authority that has the ability to radiate the goodness and love of God everywhere we go. We are called speak truth to power and to continue to shed light on false systems of authority that do not have the equality of humanity at their heart. We will not be drawn into the violence perpetrated by those who are feeling threatened, but rather respond in the confidence and love of our God given authority. Be not afraid.