

Sermon

Radical Love

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We have two challenging texts today and they both stem from authority and how we respond to what is deemed our responsibility. In our Old Testament scripture, Moses has led the people out of Egypt in the harrowing tale that started with the dividing of the sea and the drowning of the oppressors. The people escape only to find themselves in a desert, hot, dehydrated, thirsty and fearing they will die from lack of water. So they appeal to Moses, they argued with Moses about this terrible condition they find themselves in, and they yell ‘ Give us water to drink.’ And the argument ensues – Moses responds, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?” But the people yell back – “Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” Now prior to this and in other circumstances, the people did complain about unnecessary things like a lack of onions for example but this time this truly is a matter of life and death. You see, we can’t live without water. Water is life. Our bodies are made up of 60% water. Our organs don’t function without water. We can survive for a very short time in scorching dry heat like in a desert – that’s what’s happening here. And so Moses appeals to God – on behalf of the people but mostly because they’re going to kill him first before they die of thirst. And God responds – he gives Moses the authority and power to generate water for the rock at Horeb.

When people are pushed to the edge of their existence and unable to get the sustenance they need to survive, they do desperate things, even murder. We see it everyday, do we not? The crime rate in Buffalo and Niagara Falls is higher than the US average – too many people in our community do not have what they need to survive – they struggle to pay rent, buy food, obtain proper healthcare, transportation, lack of jobs or life sustaining jobs. I'm certain there are those that wish there was a Moses for them that could place his rod upon their lives and provide the needs that they are reaching for.

In our Gospel we find the chief priests challenging Jesus' authority. Jesus has set himself in the Temple, he has thrown out those who were selling in the Temple, he is providing healing – and going right after the chief priests and their authority within the Temple and over the people. The challenge posed by the chief priests and elders focuses on two closely related, yet distinct questions: “By what authority (or what kind of authority) are you doing these things (i.e., cleansing and occupying the temple)?” and “Who gave you this authority?” The first question is about the nature of Jesus' authority, the second about its source. Because Jesus currently occupies the temple, he has the upper hand, and can set the conditions for his reply. Before he will answer them, they must tell him about John's baptism: was it from heaven or merely human? This question puts them in a bind. They know that a denial of the legitimacy of John's baptism will not play well with the crowds, whose support they need. On the other hand, if they affirm that John's baptism came from heaven, he will ask them why they did not submit themselves to it. Their answer — “we don't know”. So Jesus wins this round, but as we know there is more challenge of power and authority to come.

Jesus shares a parable about two sons – a theme seen throughout the Bible – one son typically does what God wishes and the other does not – this parable is no different. It's pretty simple – we are defined by what we do, not by what we say. A challenge we Christians and honestly people of all faiths have had for generations.

On any given day, we can be one son or the other. Some days I talk a good talk, other days I walk the walk. And to whom do we revere? Can we truly do what has been put before us by Jesus? By God? It's not easy- it's radical. Radical love- love that transcends what human beings say is necessary – we live in an unbalanced world where some have so much and others don't even have clean water to drink. Oh do think I'm talking about rural areas in Africa where they lack modern processes and distribution of water? No, I was thinking of Flint, Michigan where they've not had clean water to drink for years.

Radical love means we can't remain silent when people are oppressed, animals are neglected, inequities prevail. We cannot give in to the authority that dictates and allows this to perpetuate. You see Jesus expects us to flip the tables. And our authority comes from one thing – and it's so simple. Love – unconditional love for all. That's God's love.

It is true we cannot help everyone everywhere. It is true we cannot solve every problem. But it is also true that when we band together and trust not a balance sheet, but a powerful, loving God who can move the mountain, change happens. Water from the driest rock happens.

My final question is this: By what Authority are you doing things? Do you believe that God will answer you? Is God telling you to move a mountain? Or do

you need God to move your mountain? Do you have a vision that you don't quite know how you will achieve, but you just know you have to do something?

Be radical, be bold, be loving and compassionate – flip the tables. Reclaim the temple – bring about healing and strength. You have more power than you think because you have been given authority.... by God.

Amen