

BY WHAT AUTHORITY?

Sermon preached by Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

September 28, 2008

Scripture: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

It's been a long September- beginning with the natural disasters of hurricanes Gustav, Hannah and Ike; the political rhetoric of the Republican National Convention; the 7th Anniversary of September 11th; and now the devastating blow on Wall Street. None of us has escaped untouched from these events. In our personal lives, family members are gravely ill, jobs are lost or on the line, and hope is harder and harder to muster. There is a sense of urgency in the air, for the government to take action, for the promise of economic recovery to take hold, for the end of hurricane season, for the healing of sick bodies and minds. It is a tough way to begin the fall season, when the weather is extraordinary and the air smells cleaner, and schools are back in session, and New York City is at its best.

Of course, there have been bright spots as well this month, especially here at First Church- like the smiling faces of so many children at the front of the sanctuary, geared up for the beginning of church school; our move back to this beloved sanctuary from our summer worship space; the return of our full, outstanding choir; the growing excitement over the plans to renovate the Mellin-Macnab Building; and the extensive offerings of adult education programs, service opportunities and fellowship activities that make the life of this church so vital and exhilarating. Perhaps we can conclude that September has been a mixed bag of blessings and adversity, but heavy on the adversity.

Jon and Barbara and I had an opportunity to discuss all of this last Tuesday, when we 'retreated' to Brooklyn for a day of reflection and visioning for our future as a congregation. We began with a meditation from the prophet Isaiah, who reminds us that God, who made a "way in the wilderness," is come to "do a new thing" among us. And we shared our concerns for those of you who have been highly impacted by the turmoil of Wall Street, and those who have shared sad news of an ill relative, or of your own illness. We prayed for this congregation, for the community of Greenwich Village and New York City, and for the world.

To start off our thinking, we asked the question, "What are we doing right as a church?" We had a flip chart, and Barbara's impeccable handwriting, and a marker that actually wrote, and we began shouting things out. And at the end, when the page was filled with tiny words and phrases, one thing was clearly evident. Almost everything we had come up with shared a single, common denominator- the people. You are, in every way, what makes this church great- your diversity, your gifts, your leadership, your spiritual wisdom, your faith, your commitment, your passion, your time. When a visitor feels welcome upon their first visit here, it is because you offered a warm greeting and gracious hospitality. When someone comments on the quality of the preaching, it is in part because you inspire us as preachers to speak with relevance, truth and a Spirit of love. When someone praises the music ministry, it is in part because you sing in the choir and support the ministry of music that Bill and Faye so ably facilitate. When a child demonstrates deep curiosity about the Bible and faith, it is because you have taught in the Church School and continued those conversations at home. In every aspect of church life, you make an imprint that is beautiful and indelible- whether on the

mission/service committee, in the kitchen, in the homeless shelter, at the Tartan Fair, as ordained elders and deacons, as active lay persons, even as frequent visitors.

By the end of our exercise, we were fairly overcome with emotion, and it took a bit of work to get juiced up with our own ideas. I think we felt a little lonely in Brooklyn at that point, homesick for Fifth Avenue and 12th Street, homesick for you. And we came away from that experience with the knowledge that regardless of what happens on Wall Street, or how the tumult of the world presses in upon you, we know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you will continue to be what makes this church great. You will support each other through anxious transitions, soothe each other's grief, create laughter where there is sadness, and offer your time to help those with less than you. It is your way; it is your faith; and it is why we love you so much.

So let's take our pens and scratch out the title of my sermon and replace it with a new one: 'Love Letter to a Congregation.' For that is how Jon and Barbara and I were feeling on Tuesday afternoon, and that is one, good way to describe Paul's letter to the Church of Philippi that we heard in our First Lesson this morning.

Philippi was Paul's favorite church, and he really loved them. Paul thought they were doing a great job, and he considered them his joy and crown. They were not perfect, of course, and they certainly had their struggles and disagreements, but Paul missed them and longed to be among them. Paul was in prison when he composed this love letter to Philippi, meditating on the people and the places of his journeys, and craving to once again be out in the world, sharing in the gospel and encouraging the development of these faith communities.

Philippi was Paul's favorite church, and so he offered them advice he knew they would take to heart, words to live by, accompanied by a confession of belief that we continue to use in worship to this day. "If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others... for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for God's good pleasure."

This passage begins with a question headed by "If," but there is no doubt about the answer for Paul: There is encouragement in Christ in this congregation; there is consolation from love in this congregation; there is sharing in the Spirit in this congregation; and there is compassion and sympathy in this congregation. That congregation had the means to survive any natural, national or personal tragedy that could befall them, because of these gifts that they possessed- gifts received as the fruits of their faith in Christ.

And when tragedy should befall them, or when the church of Philippi should ever begin to falter, or to forget why and for whom they were living in this manner, Paul reminds them that their deeds, the ethics of living out their faith, initiate in the reality of Jesus Christ, the one in whom they live and have their being.

Paul wrote the confession of verses 6-11 precisely to spell out the ways in which those who are in Christ ought to live. The importance of this confession lies not just in what it says about Christ, but also in its implications for the lives of those who acknowledge Christ as Lord. It is Paul's reminder that the community in Philippi, that congregation he loved,

flourished precisely because its members recognized the authority of Christ as their head. They lived ‘in Christ.’ They translated their understanding of Christ’s authority into practical ideas about leadership and life within the community.

It wasn’t all puppies and roses at the Church in Philippi, and I am sure that one of the reasons that Paul loved them so much was that they would not back down from proclaiming the authority of Jesus, even with the threat of persecution. And their actions, surely, were more about care of the community, and speaking truth to power, than simply sitting in a circle and declaring their love and unity.

This tough challenge to live ‘in Christ’ and acknowledge the authority of Jesus in the world is the theme of this morning’s Gospel lesson as well.

“By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” the chief priests and elders asked Jesus, when they found him teaching in the Temple. “By what authority do you think you belong here among us? Who do you think you are?” Jesus was an unauthorized leader who broke the ranks and drew too close to the inner circle of power and authority that the priests and elders thought they had. And he had just come waltzing through the Temple’s gates, sitting down among the worshippers, drawing a crowd around him. With neither the blood lines nor the political connections to have achieved such distinction, his popularity was unnerving to the priests and elders who witnessed it. They were not about to let Jesus get away with it. So they challenged him, by questioning his authority. And Jesus responded in kind, turning the challenge on its head.

This passage reveals a Jesus with whom we are less familiar, and with whom we may be less comfortable. This Jesus seems to taunt and mock the chief priests and the elders, backing them into a corner until they are huddled together hemming and hawing and scratching their heads. With what sounds a whole lot like sarcasm, he says to them, “I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” It’s a trick question, of course. He knows they can’t answer it. And in so doing, they reveal their fear of the crowds, and the tenuous nature of their own authority.

The theologian Walter Wink knows this Jesus, the one who won’t stand down and shows no meekness in confrontation. This is the Jesus who, according to Wink, says to ‘turn the other cheek,’ not to be hit again on the other side, but to force the attacker to strike with the left hand, a cultural taboo and shameful act. This is the Jesus who says to give your tunic to the one who stole your coat, not out of generosity, but so that your nakedness will shame the one who took from you in the first place.¹ This is a Jesus whose nonviolent techniques are cunning and whose anti-establishment notions are bold enough to be dangerous. This is a Jesus who does not hesitate to tell his disciples that the road will not be easy, and that much will be required of them. This is a Jesus who goes to the very depths of hell and back for his passionate love for the world.

“By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” the chief priests and elders ask. “By what authority?” By the authority of the grace, love, mercy and power of God. By that authority, Jesus teaches and preaches and heals among the people of Galilee, among the people of Jerusalem, among the people of every nationality, vocation, and troubled personal history. Among the women, the tax collectors, the physically and mentally

¹ Walter Wink. Keynote address, PC(USA) Peacemaking Conference, 2003.

ill; among the weak, among the oppressed, among the downtrodden, Christ comes with the authority to do a new thing. Outside the Temple's walls, apart from the traditional leadership, in opposition to Roman rule, Christ comes with the authority of God to gather God's children about him and offer a new way of living, a new kingdom of equality and justice and peace, and a new salvation that is once and for all.

And by God's authority Jesus speaks the truth to power and challenges the leadership to examine their motives, their actions and their very livelihoods. He poses another question to them, about two sons, asked by their father to work in the vineyard. The one refuses initially, but changes his mind and goes to the vineyard to work. The other agrees to his father, but never shows up in the vineyard. Which of the two has done the will of his father, asks Jesus, the one who obeyed in word, or the one who obeyed in deed? The one who obeyed in deed, the chief priests and the elders proclaimed. And Jesus says 'You are right in your answer, but you are also the son who obeyed in word only. About me I will gather the ones who have responded by their deeds, not simply by their words.'

The tax collectors and prostitutes who followed Jesus were the ones who responded to the authority of Jesus in deed, and took up the challenge to live 'in Christ.' The Church at Philippi was a congregation that responded to the authority of Jesus in word and deed, and took up the challenge to live 'in Christ.' We are the ones that respond to the authority of Jesus in word and deed, and take up the challenge to live 'in Christ.' Our confession of faith is more than the words we stand and say together each week after the sermon. Our confession of faith includes the actions that reflect us to the world as a community living 'in Christ.'

To be 'in Christ' is not about changing everything and becoming something or someone else. To be 'in Christ' is to find the true North of your compass realigned. From any location, any life crisis or fork in the road, you can pull out your faith compass and find true North. And with your compass realigned, your attitude and your actions will also realign. Your behavior will reflect your common life in Christ. You will regard others as better than yourselves not out of false modesty or lack of self-esteem, but to encourage a recognition of the rights and accomplishments of others. Your life will be yours singular and yours plural, because life lived towards the true North of Christ is lived out in the community of believers. This won't be true just in church, but it will spill out into every aspect of your life.

You might need to check your compass more often when you're not in Church, because we know it is so much easier to be a Christian in the Church than outside it. It is harder to live out our faith in the context of a secular society where we wear the badge of our Christianity in a hidden place. We don't parade it around and use it to gain the moral high ground or to justify ourselves. We express our identity through our actions and attitudes. We pray in private places; we don't flaunt our piety and wave it around for all to see. Deeds, not words, as Jesus reminds us. And so more often than not, we must pull out that compass and check our bearings when things get confusing.

For the writer Anne Lamott, this election season has become so fraught that she may be virtually clutching her compass twenty-four hours a day, for fear that the anxieties of the political environment will tear it away from her. In a recent article written for Salon.com, she describes leaving church one Sunday morning "when it turned out that the sermon was not about bearing up under desperate circumstances, when you feel like you're going crazy..." So she ended up "outside a 7-11 and had a sacramental Dove chocolate bar." Then she drank a lot

of water to metabolize the Dove bar and called a good friend to help her regain her center. Lamott's advice for times like these: "Everything you need to know about how to bear up during these... months is already inside you. Go within: Work on your own emotional acre. Stand still, and hurt, and feel crazy. Then drink a lot of water, pray, meditate, rest."²

And following the words of Scripture, and Paul's love letter to the church in Philippi, in times like these, do as you have always done- stand close to one another, share your love and seek unity within the community, take care of each other, manifesting your faith in Christ through your action. Seek your true North, and when asked by whose authority you do these things, answer with the confidence of the beloved community- by the authority of Jesus Christ.

² http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2008/09/16/anne_lamott/