

EMPOWERED WITH AUTHORITY

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Text: Matthew 21:23–27

We have been sent dangerously by God's address—called by name, entrusted with risky words, and empowered with authority.

—Walter Brueggemann, *Prayers for a Privileged People*

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I can assure you that if you act in any way that upsets the status quo or challenges the prevailing norms and wisdom of a particular setting, someone is going to ask, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” And I hope you know that it is a polite way of asking, “What gives you the right to act? Who do you think you are?” As long as someone is genuinely trying to ascertain who is empowered to act, “By what authority are you doing these things?” is a legitimate question. However, this is a particularly oft-posed question to someone who performs deeds of love, mercy and justice that threaten to upend the usual way of doing things. Every movement for justice for the oppressed, every call for liberation for the dominated and every stand in solidarity with the exploited has been resisted by questioning the authority of or seeking to discredit anyone who dares challenge the way of things.

So it is with Jesus. Toward the end of his earthly ministry, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and entered the Temple, his very presence was a challenge to the political and religious elite. He has been on a mission of “proclaiming the good news and curing every disease,” healing and liberating the most vulnerable people. To the chagrin of the political and religious elite who have allied themselves with the imperial occupiers to amass power and authority, Jesus appears to be gaining power and authority, not by force of arms or promises of patronage, but by easing the burden of oppression, economic exploitation and political domination on those on the margins. Through his actual deeds that touched lives materially, Jesus has earned the right to act with authority. By the time Jesus arrives into the center of their power, public opinion is on his side, with people testifying to him as agent, messenger and the message of God.

When the political and religious elite get their chance, they ask the big question: “By what authority are you doing these things?” What gives you the right to do what you do? What gives you the right to heal? What gives you the right to embrace and break bread with the people we rejected? What gives you the right to pronounce favor on the people we discounted? What gives you the right to do justice if it disrupts what we have built for ourselves? What gives you the right to pronounce judgment on our authority?

It's a question posed in bad faith. We know they don't want to know how Jesus is empowered to do what he does. What they want is for him to stop: stop acting with concern for the interests, needs and concerns for others; stop calling people by their names so that they see themselves as beloved; stop inviting them to imagine a more just ordering of society because it interferes with the setup that privileges a few at the expense of the many; stop doing justice. These leaders with assumed and appropriated authority don't ask the question to discern what is truly expected of them or how to exercise their authority with integrity.

They seek to trap and discredit a message that is both liberating and transformative: Jesus is empowered to act with authority because his every deed reflects the love, mercy and justice that prevail in God's reign.

Jesus answers their question with a question, but the elites cannot concede the point, certainly not to a peasant rabbi surrounded by people without names, without status and without power. They cannot admit that they have failed to love their neighbor; that they have failed to heal the sick; that they have failed to feed the hungry and clothe the naked; that they have failed to be doers of the word rather than just hearers. They will have to admit that perhaps John and Jesus are the ones who truly are empowered with authority to lead and serve while the elites must strategize and calculate to hold onto power. Everything about how Jesus loved, served, embraced and liberated was a challenge to the powers that be. No, the religious and political elites were not truly interested in knowing by what authority, because the answer would have revealed something too frightening to admit: that human authority, unmoved by the prompting to love, disinterested in the pursuit of justice, uninspired by a moral imagination, eventually and inevitably becomes the source of oppression, domination and exploitation.

I hope we notice that Jesus doesn't really answer the question. Neither does he ever claim any authority in response to their challenge. He doesn't have to. His deeds speak loudly. His are the actions of a faithful servant who accepts God's call to be the agent, messenger and the message of God's unconditional love for all people. His are the actions of one who knows that right words and right doctrine can never substitute for doing the right work . . . the just work. His are the actions of one who is willing to take the risk to stand on the side of the outcast, the degraded, the rejected and the exploited—to go all-in for what is right and good, not for what is safe, personal or expedient. Jesus has earned the right to act with authority.

I must confess I get nervous when it comes to talk about authority, especially in the church. Perhaps it comes from being a preacher's kid, but I have a near knee-jerk instinct to question authority and rebel against it. And I suspect we all have some story about the abuse and misuse of authority that cause us to be suspicious of authority. It is much easier and safer to talk about authority if the subject is Jesus. And yet, we, who take faith seriously and who think deeply about justice and liberation, have to contend with our own power and authority. The theologian Walter Brueggemann spoke directly to how we encounter authority as part and parcel of our embrace of the kingdom of heaven when he declares: "We have been sent dangerously by God's address—called by name, entrusted with risky words, and empowered with authority."

So, the question is rightly asked of us—of you, of me, of Plymouth—by what authority do we do what we do? What gives us the right to act in the face of poverty, injustice and oppression? Who are we to make claims about what is good and right? And this isn't a hypothetical or theoretical exercise for this church. How do I know? I'll give you one name: Eliza Winston, an enslaved black woman who gained her freedom because the people of Plymouth dared act on their faith. In the earliest days of the life of this congregation, when the right to enslave people of African descent was protected by law, in 1860, some of the people and friends of Plymouth heeded the call to love and serve their neighbors. At risk to their standing, their reputation and their own freedom and esteem, they orchestrated the liberation of Eliza Winston from bondage in chattel slavery. They challenged an unjust law, not just with words but with action, inviting criticism from the religious and political elites and potential violence. By what authority did Plymouth do it? What gave them the right?

Those who love God with all their hearts, minds and souls and their neighbors as themselves; those who embody the kingdom of heaven, the reign of God, not only in words but also in their deeds; those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, tend to the sick and visit the prisoner have earned the right to act with authority. They can be trusted to act. Through her deeds, Plymouth became the agent, messenger and the message of love, justice and liberation. The people of Plymouth bore witness with their action that right

words and right doctrine can never substitute for doing the right work . . . the just work. Plymouth earned the right to act with authority.

A community committed to a covenantal form of discipleship, in which it seeks to serve God and neighbor within, among and beyond will bind itself to what is good, right and just. The covenant we made to God and to each other gives us authority to serve our neighbors. The commitment we have made to a common purpose binds us together to be individually and communally agents, messengers and message of love. The choice we make over and over, day by day, to bind ourselves to God and to each other in the pursuit of justice for all gives us authority to pray, sing, proclaim, break bread and act decisively for the good. Amen.