

Proper 21 Exodus 17, Philippians 2, Matthew 21 David Schlafer

- 1) Do you have “issues” with authority? I do.
 - When the flashing blue light appears in my rear view mirror,
my heart begins to race, my palms begin to sweat.
When given a direct order, my teeth start to clench, my shoulders start to stiffen.
I am what you would call “Authority Resistant.”
 - BUT if I’m struck by another vehicle on the Interstate,
that flashing blue light can’t come fast enough.
If I’m in a choir, singing wrong notes, and the director said:
Those are not the notes on the score; sing what you like—all notes are good
I would not be pleased.
I am, you see, an uneasy mix of Authority Resistance and Authority Insistence
I don’t like authority figures—until I really want them.

- 2) I doubt you have authority issues; but I’ll offer one observation about our fellow citizens:
In our squabbles about budgets and deficit reductions,
 - Some of us keep shouting: *Government should just leave people alone.*
 - Others shout the opposite: *Government should never just leave people alone.*
 - Many say first one, then the other,
depending on the “right” they happen to be defending at the moment.
These folks have issues with authority—Authority Resistance and Authority Dependence.

- 3) When I’m in Authority Resistance mode I have sympathy
for the religious leaders who are giving Jesus serious push back this morning
 - *Who gave you the right?* Is not the start of a cordial conversation
It’s a way of saying—*Get out of my face, you’re invading my space*
So why am I in sympathetic with these religious leaders?
Imagine someone who just appears in your house,
with a self-appointed cleaning agenda:
reorganizing your closets, cabinets, chests—rearranging all the furniture—
tossing out treasures you have held for years,
bringing in in all sorts of new and unfamiliar stuff.
Would that upset you? It wouldn’t like it much.
 - No wonder these religious leaders so angry, then:
Jesus enters the city on a donkey
Trashes temple—turns it into healing clinic for the lame and blind,
then lets it out for children’s choir concert (*Hosanna to the son of David!*)
This isn’t your temple! its keepers say, *Get out of our space! Who gave you the right!*
I have sympathy for their resistance to authority, don’t you?

- 4) In Authority Insistence mode—I have sympathy for the folks out in the wilderness with Moses.
 - They have followed him out of Egypt, and across the Red Sea
They have, by and large, done what they’ve been told.
When hungry, they have gotten get manna from heaven.
Direction—Protection—Provision—Pretty Sweet!
What an awesome divine authority they have to depend upon!
 - Then suddenly this authority leaves them high and dry--no water--not a drop to drink

- *Where are you when we really need you?* they ask; first of Moses, then of God.
We've been depending on you, and now you let us down.

I've said things like at dry places in my life, have you?

So I have sympathy w/their desperate insistence on an authority to depend upon.

5) And yet, I've also got some sympathy both for Jesus and for Moses, don't you?

- The folks Jesus faces in the temple are so intent on protecting their authority, they're oblivious to the desperate needs of those they should be using it to help; they can't fathom that this invasion on their space just might do everybody good. Poor Jesus—what can he do to help them receive the gift of his authority?
- The folks Moses deals with are so desperate for a drink, they've totally forgotten how God *has* met their needs before; and they just can't trust that, thirsty as they are; they *haven't* been abandoned. Poor Moses—how can he show them that God's authority is a gift that keeps on giving?
- Both these Authority Resisters and these Authority Insisters need serious help. But the way each group demands that help keeps them from accepting it.
- Moses: addresses their need, but, alas, it just exacerbates their addictive dependency. It does not foster a trust in the God who gives them water. (They see the water, but don't see God) *Nice try, Moses!* But it doesn't work.
- Jesus: refuses to answer the question to which they won't accept an answer anyway. (If they didn't see God's authority in John the Baptist, he figures, they won't in him.) So he tells a little story about two boys, both of whom have serious authority issues. Both sons resist the father's authority in one way or another.
 - One is initially oh-so-deferential—*Yes sir, anything you say, sir.* But in the end, this son can't seem to get beyond the fear that the father's authority is an invasion of his personal space.
 - The other son is initially oh-so-defensive—*No way!* But he is eventually able to see that what sounds like an order from his father, is really an invitation—an invitation that authorizes him to share authority w/his father in tending a fruitful family growing space.

Nice story, Jesus! Maybe it'll work. But of course it doesn't.

So much for the teaching strategies of Moses and Jesus.

The issues people have with authority—

both Authority Resistance and Authority Insistence—run very deep.

It's hard to teach folks who have issues with authority.

Do be so resistant! Don't be so insistent! Yeah, right.

6) This is a problem St. Paul faces today as well.

He's up to his ears, trying to sort through authority issues in the letter he writes to the Christians in Philippi.

Exactly what the quarrel is, we don't know.

What we do know is that it is causing fractures in what had been a united church.

Folks are not of the same mind—two women leaders are at loggerheads—
how will they work it out?

Paul could just come marching in as an uber-authority figure: *NOW HEAR THIS!*

You know how much good that would do—but what else *can* he do?

Well, he doesn't, like Moses, work a mighty wonder.

He doesn't, like Jesus, tell a little story.

He tries something altogether different:

He sings to them—sings them a song they probably know already,
but a song they probably haven't sung since this power struggle started.

It's a song about authority—a song in a most unusual key.

Let this same mind be in you . . . he sings that was also in Christ Jesus

Who, though God, did not claim the authority of deity.

But became instead a humble human servant—though that became the death of him.

What kind of authority is this, for heaven's sake?

Authority not as an imposition on us, but authority as identification with us.

Authority as assisting, affirming, supporting, sacrificing. An upside down authority, indeed.

- 7) But hold on—wait a minute, the song goes on, and it begins to sound sadly familiar:

*Therefore God has highly exalted him, Paul sings,
and given him a name that is above every name.*

*That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
every tongue confess that he is Lord of all*

Sounds just like authority as usual, does it not?

You do your time down in the pits of local politics;
eventually you garner enough gratitude so folks will owe you;
with that political capital, you climb to the very top—everyone bows,
and you tell them what they better do for their own good, or else.

That's the same old authority we clench at and clutch after—

authority that fosters subservience—

authority that leads us right back to Authority Resistance and Authority Insistence.

- 8) Maybe, but then again, maybe not . . . Wolterstoff Story {SEE END}

THAT's the kind of authority, the kind of exaltation, the kind grateful confession
that Paul is singing about.

This kind of authority generates neither resistance nor insistence.

It generates the kind of interdependence that marks a healthy community

This is the authority of Jesus.

- This authority is NOT a display of subservience to his Father.
It is a graphic display of the authority in God's own heart—
A divine authority that tirelessly and joyfully serves the world.

- This is not an authority you and I have to struggle to attain.
It is an authority implanted within us by the servant authority of Christ.
We have only to recognize and release it.

That's no small task, of course, it is a working out with fear and trembling
of the authority God has already worked into us.

Fear and trembling—not because God will smack us upside the head if we mess up.

But because the history of the world, to which the standoffs of our current politics testify,
is so beaten down with authority as domination

that the kind of authority God embodies in Christ seems simply too good to

But little pockets of God's authority—authentic authority—
just do keep surfacing in surprising places.

I'll be you have your own Nicholas Wolterstoff stories—

stories of people you'd follow anywhere, do anything they asked,

because of how they have used their authority to authorize your own.

Sit and think about a story of your own like that for just a minute

Take a minute to share it with someone at coffee hour/after the service, will you?

- 11) When you and I exercise this kind of authority, we are, I think,
like the son in Jesus' story who may start out by saying NO,
but then comes to see that he has everything to lose, and nothing to gain by resisting;
nothing to lose, everything to gain by both acknowledging, and claiming the authority
of the God who keeps a vineyard not for God's own self,
but a vineyard from which to share the fruits with every last one of us.
At the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus, who has so upset so many authoritarians,
releases and commissions his disciples:
All authority is given to me, he says, in heaven and on earth
Go . . . Exercise it with everyone as I have done with you.

The main pieces of my "Nicholas Wolterstorff story":

- 1) When I was a young philosophy teacher, inexperienced and insecure, because he was going to be in town anyway, I invited world renowned philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff to lecture to my classes. I wanted him, of course; but was terrified at showing him how little I really knew.
- 2) Picking him up at O'Hare Airport (after going to the wrong gate, and delaying him for half an hour), I got lost three times on the clover leaves of the Interstate at the airport. "Very mysterious," was all he said.
- 3) I arrived home with him to find that supper wasn't ready, and that we would have to spend some time talking. He asked me about my interests in philosophy. I froze. But he listened intently, and engaged me in conversation. Eventually the conversation started to dance with energy, and I began to hear myself saying things I had no idea that I even knew.
- 4) Wolterstorff had, in fact, descended to my humble level, and raised me up to his.
- 5) He did the same thing the next evening at dinner with my teaching colleague, whose mother-in-law was visiting them, and cooked the supper. After he had left, beaming, she told her daughter and son-in-law: "He came into the kitchen, sat down at the table, and talked with me about my fried chicken!"