

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for September 25, 2011
Exodus 17:1-7 and Matthew 21:23-32

TWO VERY DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

Very often, it is the nature of the questions we ask that determines our choices and sets the tone for our responses to situations and people. One person starting a small business begins with an idea for a good product, and because that product is the first concern, asks most frequently and most urgently, “How can I make this as good a product (whatever it is) as possible and still be able to sell it?” Another person begins and ends with the question of profit: “How can I sell something (anything) for the highest profit?” What this second person offers for sale does not matter much as long as it sells at either high volume or substantial profit per unit. We Americans buy an awful lot of junk made on the cheap by exploiting people somewhere in the world, and we are now feeling the high costs of low prices. When people are discounted, it comes back on us. Where did our jobs go? You need only visit a big-box store to find your answer.

Now, does the business with a high quality product not need to make a profit? What a silly question. The issue is priority which sets the context for the other questions.

I was in a presbytery meeting, and we were debating a so-called “hot button” issue. Ministers and elders who wished to speak lined up along either side of the sanctuary and the lines took turns so that one person spoke in favor of the motion and the next spoke against it, alternating until the time for debate expired. What struck me as I listened was the difference in priority. From one side, the foremost question was, *What will happen to our standards and the purity of our church?* From the other side, *What is happening to people we love who seek to put their trust in Christ and follow him?* Now, let’s be fair. The first side would contend that people are served faithfully only when the standards are upheld. The other side would argue that standards can go wrong and damage people. So, I heard about standards, then people; purity, then compassion; law, then anguish. From one side I heard certainty laced with disgust; from the other, uncertainty urged by compassion.

Keeping the Sabbath is one of the Ten Commandments God gave the covenant people after claiming them in love and delivering them from their slavery in Egypt. Even so, Jesus told his critics, “The Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath.” For him, the standard was love: love for God first and foremost but inseparable from it, love for our neighbors in this world, and he pushed that standard so far as to extend love even to our

enemies. That extension is not so impractical as people have labeled it. Jesus' idea is not for us to join our enemies but to stop imitating them. The idea is for us to counter evil with good, anger with understanding and self-restraint, cruelty with kindness, and hatred with respect for the image of God in the other person. Otherwise, the cycles of contempt and revenge continue unbroken, and we become just like our enemies.

Look at the two quite different questions asked in our scripture lessons, because the difference is very important. The religious authorities demand to know *by what authority* Jesus acts and teaches as he does. They ask that question because authority is what distinguishes them from the rest of the people and what matters to them most. Of course, they would call it God's authority, as religious authorities always do. In contrast, the frustrated, angry, and frightened Israelites demand to know from Moses, "Is Yahweh [the LORD, God] among us or not?" It's not an innocent question, and as the people persist in asking it despite all the ways in which God cares for them, delivers them from slavery and death, and provides for them in the wilderness, both Moses and God grow annoyed by it. When will they learn to trust their God? Even so, this question from the people is the one we should give priority as a community of faith in Jesus the Christ. He sends us into the world to represent him to people in need of God's redemptive love, just as God the Father sent him to represent that love fully in life and in death. I say without fear of contradiction that most people do not come to a worship service to hear about the minister's authority to preach and interpret the Bible or the Session's authority to make decisions that guide us as a church or the Presbyterian Church's authority to speak of God's truth or even the Bible's authority to speak God's will for human life. Authority is not their question. Does God care about them, their lives, and the sufferings of people in this world? Is God among us or not?

Jesus refuses to answer the question of authority for those who are in love with it. How could he refuse? What could be more important to proclaim, defend, and establish beyond question than his authority to represent God truly and absolutely? Well, Jesus does not seem to think his authority so important as God's love for which he will give his life. What the people need most is God's compassion and enough trust in it to find new life as God's beloved community.

So, the two questions are authority and love? Must we choose one absolutely and throw the other away, like product quality without profit? I find that when theology gets muddy, thinking in terms of the parent-child relationship often helps. Children (and they are many) who must grow up without parental authority are in trouble and often cause trouble. They need the security, restraint, and guidance of adults in charge. But if love is conditional upon submission to the parents' authority, then while the child may be very well behaved, the underlying situation is even worse. If love is just a tool of authority to be withheld or

measured out in small doses for purposes of control, then it never really becomes love, and the child must always measure up or suffer rejection and shame.

People react negatively to the term “unconditional love” because they equate it with unconditional permissiveness and with an almost uncaring, hands-off attitude from the parent, but that equation is false. Rather, love is the context for life and the motive for discipline, teaching, and guidance. And the love will hold no matter what – no matter how distressed, angry, worried, or grieved the parent may have to become. And now we’re close to talking about God again. Like everything else human, our love is far from perfect, but it’s still the best and most important thing we have.

“Is God among us or not?” True enough, there are people who enjoy debating God’s existence as an intellectual matter. Fine, they have their game and play it, though perhaps with more distress than they let show. I think, however, that many who say they don’t believe in God are really saying they don’t believe there is a God who cares about them and about this world. They don’t need authority; they need grace. What’s missing is not proof of God’s being but empowerment to trust in God’s love and mercy. To be met with respect and not labeled is more than some people get from Christianity. To be recognized as human and worthwhile. To be allowed to ask real questions without having to fear rejection or censure. To be talked with rather than talked at or about. To be allowed to share themselves a little at a time as the self gains confidence to peek out. To be able to risk being known a little more at a time without being judged. To be treated honestly, not gushed over but not snubbed, either.

It’s not easy. Life is hard, and in some ways faith makes it even harder or, at least, so it can seem. The unloved child builds up a wall of protection. The shamed child adapts to being different and learns to take a kind of pride in the very differences that others have made matters of shame. Letting someone know us and care is a risk because it opens the door to possible disappointment or rejection. That’s the central issue of faith: it’s not about believing what we’re told to believe, but opening ourselves to a love we can neither prove nor control. Too much of Christianity pretends to offer ways to make God’s love and care into certainties, and those who buy into it must then pretend to be certain. But God is not a source of power we can tap into as we wish. God is not for our use. God has created us to be free and responsible, to trust and go forward in trust without certainty. Is God among us or not? Yes, God is among us and wants to be; indeed, God refuses to go away and leave us alone. But God knows how bad it is for us think we can appropriate divine power to elevate ourselves and lord it over each other. So, God remains hidden, beyond proof and certainty but close enough for trust, hope, and love.

As a community of faith, a congregation – a gathering – of Christ’s church, we can help each other open up, however little at a time, to trusting God’s love for us and risking hope that life can indeed be made new and promising. We can help each other up when we stumble or fall. We can listen and learn to let ourselves care. Praying for each other reinforces caring; it’s not magic but a repeated act of entrusting ourselves and each other to our unseen God.

What a difference this way of faith makes! No longer are people confronted by a checklist of beliefs on Christian authority’s clipboard. Jesus refuses to answer the question of his authority. He did not come to be the authority or satisfy the people with the clipboards by giving them the absolute checklist. He came to embody – to live and to die – the answer to the people’s question: *Is God among us or not?* Amen.