

Sermon for Sunday, September 27, 2020 - "Authority Issues"

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

The readings from Philippians and Matthew today speak to key questions these days, questions about authority: Who has it, how it is used, and for whom?

We're asking these things ourselves a lot right now.

Who has the authority to issue a mask mandate?

Who should decide if schools can be online or in person?

How will we freely and fairly vote for those who have authority in our government?

Will transfers of power happen peacefully?

Should the church use its authority to speak to issues of politics and government or should we just focus on matters of faith?

Of course, our readings today don't speak directly to those topics, but they do address the larger question of authority in ways that can help us in these difficult days. The religious leaders ask Jesus, "By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?" It would help if we knew *what things* they're asking about. We just have to rewind a few verses back in this same chapter of Matthew to see what Jesus is doing that is such a threat to these leaders.

They ask Jesus about his authority just after he enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey, a symbolic gesture that demonstrates he is the true King of the Jews, not Herod, Rome's puppet king. The crowds of peasants shout, "Hosanna to the Son of David", claiming him as their king. Jesus then enters the temple and drives out the money changers and all who were buying and selling. Jesus condemns them for robbing the poor who are seeking to pray. In the temple, those who are blind and lame come to Jesus and he heals them. He pays special attention to those who are outcast and marginalized. The children continue to cry out, "Hosanna to the Son of David". in the temple.

Matthew tells us that when the chief priests and scribes see the amazing things Jesus is doing and hear the cries of the children, they become angry. They become angry because Jesus is challenging their power and Jesus is challenging the power of Rome. In other words, Jesus is engaged in political action. He isn't just concerned with people's hearts and with the afterlife. Jesus is concerned with how rulers and those in authority are using their power. Are they just giving lip service to doing God's will - that leaders care for those who are poor, sick, outcast and strangers? Or, are they actively working for God's ways and God's justice?

Jesus expects the political and religious leaders to use their power and influence not for their own gain, not for their own security and wellbeing, but for the sake of others. He expects them to get to work in God's vineyard for the wellbeing of all people.

Jesus expects the same from us. He asks us to use whatever authority, power and influence we have for the sake of others. The Apostle Paul describes this beautifully when he writes, "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.”

This charge is not just limited to how we act within our congregation or with other Christians. This is a charge for our whole lives as disciples of Jesus. It needs to shape how we spend our money and time, how we vote, how we use our words and actions out in the world.

Our larger church body, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has a new social message entitled “Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy”¹ that was just adopted by the ELCA Church Council. I encourage you all to read it. The link is in the October newsletter and on the website, as is updated information about voting in our county. We will have an Adult Forum on this topic this fall.

Here are some important pieces of the social message that call us to actively work through the political process in our democracy for the well-being of all.

“Lutherans have learned that energetic civic engagement is part of their baptismal vocation, both as individuals and through the church’s corporate witness. Such civic participation is not simply voluntary, idealistic, or altruistic. The ELCA holds to the biblical idea that God calls God’s people to be active citizens and to ensure that everyone benefits from the good of government.

The ELCA is called as a church body to discern nonpartisan means of civic engagement ... In this role our institutional witness is to foster justice, racial and social equity, reconciliation, and healing with compassion and imagination.

We should oppose governmental policies and programs that undercut public health, impose economic damage, destroy the environment, or deny neighbors their dignity and rights. This is true even while we recognize that some policy choices place these issues in tension with one another. Whenever there is division and oppression, this church should advocate for a more just distribution of both the benefits and the burdens of participating in democracy.”¹

Beloved of God, We are to use our authority and our power as individuals and as a church body to get to work in God’s vineyard.

We can do this right now by voting, encouraging others to vote and working for a free and fair election. I encourage you to go to our church body’s website, ELCA.org and type votes in the search bar. This will bring you to a page with lots of resources for supporting free and fair elections. You can also sign up to get updates and more ideas about how to be involved now. I also encourage you to go to the nonpartisan website votefwd.org and sign up to help write letters to encourage others to vote. Research is showing that voters who were unlikely to vote are more likely to do so when they get a personal letter. If we all write five such letters, we can make a difference.

We can do this work beloved of God. You can do this work. As Philippians tells us, it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work. We can give of ourselves and our power and authority for the sake of others in all aspects of our lives because Christ Jesus has given of himself so freely for us.

As Paul writes, Christ Jesus does not regard equality with God as something to be grasped. He doesn’t hang on to his power and privilege. He gives it away for you and for all people to experi-

ence abundant life now and forever. We have been baptized into Christ Jesus, we share now in the life of Christ, we can give of ourselves freely and fully.

Let's do this work together. Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

¹A Social Message on "Government and Civic Engagement in the United States: Discipleship in a Democracy" As adopted unanimously by the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on June 24, 2020.

[https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Government and Civic Engagement Social Message.pdf? ga=2.3245298.318514780.1600872761-2123602584.1576597965& gac=1.20910794.1598568607.Cj0KCQjws536BRDTARIsANeUZ5-Gw-tPdaaVpGCOvq8_QmBued3_W-Tn1jvGh29gS](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Government%20and%20Civic%20Engagement%20Social%20Message.pdf?ga=2.3245298.318514780.1600872761-2123602584.1576597965&gac=1.20910794.1598568607.Cj0KCQjws536BRDTARIsANeUZ5-Gw-tPdaaVpGCOvq8_QmBued3_W-Tn1jvGh29gS)