

Pentecost 17A Proper 21

October 1, 2017

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 God forgives the penitent, punishes the unrepentant, has no pleasure in the death of anyone

Philippians 2:1-13 Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling

Matthew 21:23-32 By what authority are you doing these things?

When I started work as an electrical engineer I was teamed up with a senior engineer, working as his assistant. As we began working on projects together, it didn't take long to learn what it meant to be a 'go-fer'. But pretty quickly I caught onto the job of project engineering; and I began making suggestions, and taking initiative. It wasn't received well. I was the young boy in the department, and I had to earn my way into a position of responsibility. I had to earn my credentials for the authority I wanted so badly.

Jesus was teaching a lesson in authority and responsibility. The chief priests had seen Jesus preaching. They had seen him drive the merchants out of the Temple courtyard. What they did not see was any justification for this young man Jesus to presume the authority for what he was doing. Where was his master's degree, or what powerful person did he know who could vouch for him?

Jesus used the logic of a rabbi, as he talked about John the Baptist, to tell the chief priests that even though he was only in his early thirties, he did not have to earn his way into a position of authority. His source of authority was God.

He told the story of two sons; one who rejected his father's call to go to work, but went anyways; and one who said 'sure, dad', but then went off and ignored his father. The moral of that story is that what pleases God is not fine words, if they are not backed up by action; but by right actions, regardless of our first words, or our first reaction. We are responsible to live by our faith, and not just profess it and then do as we please. God holds us responsible.

Paul offers some help for us, to understand how this authority of God works. First, he said, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Jesus was divine; he had all authority, but he refused to claim it. What he relied on was his commitment to fulfill God's will for his life; and through that faith in the Father, his actions and teachings carried the authority of God. I think that was the 'mind of Christ' Paul was describing: To learn the mind of God; to be humble in faith in God; to claim God's authority, not our own authority; and to act in ways that show our commitment to live under God's authority.

Next, Paul told the Philippians, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." That verse is worth pulling apart;

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;”

We don't **inherit** faith in Jesus Christ: not from our parents, or from our friends, or by hanging around people who believe in Jesus. We **decide on our own** faith by inviting Christ's Spirit to live in us. It is our own personal decision, and it is reflected in the way we decide to live our lives; the way we handle life when it doesn't go the way we want, and who we go to with thanks when things go well.

“It is God who is at work in you.”

God doesn't show His presence with us by making us glow in the dark, or making us perfect, or making everything we touch come out perfectly. But we can learn to hear His voice through thoughts, dreams, and God-incidents that happen around us. We can learn to use them to guide us.

“God is at work in you... enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” This is the answer to Jesus' parable to the chief priests. What is better; to say the wrong thing and do the right thing, or the other way around? The BEST answer is to learn how God thinks, then think how God thinks, and then to act in a way that pleases and honors God. Paul says that by God being at work in you, God ENABLES you to want, and to work for, the things that please God.

One day fifteen years ago I got a telephone call that my dad, back in northern New York, was being rushed to the hospital in Syracuse. My two brothers loaded him into a car: he passed out part way to the hospital. I learned that he had a severe brain aneurism. The doctors had to do a lot of work to stop the bleeding. When I got to Syracuse I met my brothers, and went to see dad, who was now on life support. He was in a deep coma. The doctors said he would probably never come out of the coma. If he did, there was so much brain damage that he would probably not be able to talk, or to recognize anyone.

I am the oldest son. My brothers and sister expected me to work out with them and the doctors what to do. I felt the responsibility to honor our dad, and honor the input from the doctors and my family. My family gave me an authority I did not want. It was a responsibility I did not want. But both were mine, and I remember how heavy the authority and responsibility felt. But I was more mature in my faith by that time, and I remember asking God to guide me; to help me say the right things; to listed carefully; to work out decisions for our father's care that would please God. My whole family felt God's hand at work in our care for our father.

I wish I had known about that source of authority when I was that new project engineer. I wish I had been more aware of that when I was a new husband, and a new parent. I wish I had understood that God ENABLES me to please Him. That knowledge could have guided me, and does guide me much more in my life now.

The key piece of learning here is to be confident that through our decision to be people of God, we have been given the authority to claim God's approval; and God's approval is based on carrying God's presence into every facet of our lives. This is not a self-serving authority, like the one I was after as a new engineer. This is humble authority, based on God being in you, God choosing to work through you; and you choosing to live that life of faith.

I pray that we encourage each other in this life of authority and responsibility that Jesus invites us into. Amen.