



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Authority

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 28, 2014  
The sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 21:23-32 and Philippians 2:1-13*

The UN General Assembly has felt very ... close ... this week. Here at St. Bart's, we feel very much in the middle of things. We are in the middle of things, given our location, right next door to where our President and other heads of state stay. You may have seen the police communications center right outside our front doors this past week, and officers around the church day and night.

Yesterday afternoon there was a lovely wedding here in our Chapel. In my dreams as the officiant of that wedding, the RV-sized communications center would go somewhere else for a couple of hours and the metal fences would disappear temporarily, the better for St. Bart's elegance to shine forth. But alas. The giant communications center remained parked squarely in front of the chapel doors and the metal fences were in record number.

As a wedding gift of sorts, two dozen or so dark blue-uniformed police officers lined up on the steps in front of the chapel, standing in formation with their hands behind their backs. They appeared to be guarding the chapel entrance and/or offering a special show of respect. It was impressive. The wedding guests, who had flown in from literally all over the world, were good-spirited about these very unusual wedding decorations.

Finally, the beautiful bride appeared, gliding down the sidewalk between the metal fences, passing in front of the communications van, long veil floating behind her. She looked in amazement at the two rows of police officers shoulder to shoulder in front of the chapel doors. Then she smiled and stepped up on the step with them. Cameras clicked. One of the best wedding photos ever!

By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?

Authority is always with us. It seems especially evident to us this week: The leaders of countries speaking at the UN, each having the authority of his/her position. The authority to close streets and sidewalks, to park in certain places. The debate about whether our President has the authority to initiate military action against ISIS. The ongoing look at the authority of the police and how that is used. The authority of a parent over a child—to a certain age. My own authority, as both the church authority and the state authority in solemnizing the marriage of two people yesterday—and in preaching from this pulpit.

What is your own authority? And where does it come from?

When the chief priests and elders (clearly people with a certain authority) ask Jesus this question, it's not out of the blue. Just the day before, according to Matthew's gospel, Jesus had entered Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, to the shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God!" Then Jesus went straight to the Temple, where he threw out all the buyers and sellers. He overturned the tables of loan sharks and the stalls of dove merchants. He made room for the blind and crippled to get in. They came to Jesus and he healed them. Children were running and shouting through the Temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" The chief priests and scribes were furious. Jesus left the Temple, left Jerusalem for Bethany, where he spent the night. [*The Message*, Eugene Petersen]

The next day, he's back in the Temple, teaching. The chief priests and elders come up and challenge him: Where did you go to seminary? What degree do you have? Who ordained you?

Jesus' response to their challenge is to challenge them back, in essence saying authority can come from God or from humans. One commentator on Matthew offers this view about the two forms of authority:

No matter how sophisticatedly it is packaged, human authority is a matter of raw power. If you have enough people behind you or guns with you, you have it, and what you say goes, period. [God's] authority, on the other hand, has to do with the truth, the truth of God, the truth about who God made us to be. In the short run, human authority can appear to overwhelm divine authority—even to crucify it—but, ultimately, God's truth prevails. [*Matthew*, Thomas G. Long, p. 241]

Authority is one kind of power, and it is contextual. A wonderfully nuanced treatment of authority is given by James Hillman, American psychologist and former director of studies at the Jung Institute in Zurich. In his book, *Kinds of Power: A Guide to Its Intelligent Uses*—which I highly recommend to you—Hillman notes that authority may be an individual's particular gift, but its actual power is not really there until given confirmation by society. Authority "must be recognized. I may be experienced, intelligent, unique and [talented], but until I am needed, until my voice is called for, I do not have authority." Note: authoritative is not the same as authoritarian.

Hillman notes that authority gives enormous power. One voice can sway a thousand ... or a million. The potential for tyranny is there the moment any one of us exercises our authority. Shakespeare, in *Measure for Measure*, puts it this way: "O, it is excellent/To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous/To use it like a giant." [Hillman p. 162-163]

What saves authority from becoming tyranny is exactly what Paul's letter to the Philippians describes:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Jesus had the authority of God, God's own authority, but he did not exploit that. Rather, he emptied himself, he humbled himself. Jesus did not tyrannize with his power; he did not use it to his own advantage. Jesus emptied himself, until there was nothing standing between him and us ... nothing ... there was no judge, no judgment.

Self-emptying is the unexpected—but necessary—flip side to authority.

In just a few minutes, six people will be baptized here. Baptisms are always an occasion of great joy. In our tradition, whenever one person is baptized, our whole community renews our Baptism vows. Amazing! Through even one person's baptism (much less six!), God is breathing new life into a whole community.

Each person baptized has a cross traced on her/his forehead and is "marked as Christ's own forever." As the person grows into this identity of "Christ's own forever," how might that identity inform their understanding of their authority?

The real surprise to me as I wrestled with these lessons this week was how my attention came to focus on the phrase "changed his mind/change your minds." That phrase occurs twice in our reading from Matthew. In the parable of the two sons, the first son refused to go work in the vineyard, then changed his mind and went. Jesus tells the chief priests and elders: the tax collectors and prostitutes believed John and their lives were changed. Even after you saw how their lives had changed, you did not change your minds and believe John.

"Changing your mind" in the Greek carries more of a sense of changing what you care about, what is important to you. It's not so much a head thing, but a heart thing. There is a change of heart, we would say, a re-orientation, a change about what is truly important in our lives.

Again, James Hillman: "We can't change anything until we get some fresh ideas, until we begin to see things differently."

To me, getting fresh ideas and seeing things differently are intimately related to a change of heart.

These lessons encourage us to ask ourselves: What is my own authority? And where does it come from? To whom or what do I give authority? What is truly important in my life? How might my heart need to change?

Thanks be to God, who never stops breathing new life into each of us, into this community, and through us, into the world.