

Year B, 4th Sunday after the Epiphany
January 31, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”

Today is the third in a series on the will of God. These are complicated times. Feelings, ideas, opinions, many deeply held, suffering and fear, so many unknowns... the vaccines are here, but for too many getting them is elusive. Even with the change of leadership in Washington, acrimony and alternative facts still swirl about. How do we keep our heads? How do we know what's right and not just what our opinions tell us, as well-reasoned as they may be? How do we know what needs doing and that we can do? The answer is to seek the will of God, the pure lightness of our everlasting Father in heaven. Right? In hard times, remembering it is about God, not us, can steer us straight. We need to find God's will.

Last week we spoke about discerning the will of God. How can we tell what is of God and what is not? We talked about Ignatius' discernment of spirits and all of that, and how we hear God's voice in the voices of others, in human and natural creativity, in taking the time to quiet ourselves enough to perceive the still small voice of God that beckons to each and everyone one of Christ's would-be disciples.

OK. So we know that it is God's will, not ours that must be done. Check. We have an inkling of how to discern what is of God and what is not (or at least that it takes work and we need to work on it). Check. So now what? You have discerned what God would have from you, would have you do... now how do you go about putting that into action?

God's will can steer our lives, our choices in all sorts of ways. “Should I have a second piece of cake?” “Do I really need this thing I want to buy? Is it worth the cost to the earth and society?” “How upset should I be about my child's choices?” God can help with that, surely, but our own will might be/maybe even should be sufficient. But what of those larger issues, issues with real impact on your life and the world beyond... what should I do with my wealth, especially if it is unearned or earned through morally dubious means? How do I confront injustice? How do I ally with marginalized people, and not in a token way, but in ways like making reparations, affirmative action, giving up underserved privileges to the benefit of others? How do I atone for the sins of my forbearers? This theme, family histories, came up over and over again in the Sacred Ground anti-racism group we have had here the past six months. How do we have the courage, the strength to changes habits and patterns that are bad for others? And then when we know what we are supposed

to do, how do we express ourselves, not with the authority of our own humble opinion, but with the voracity, the authority of the Will of God?

There are so many things we are called by God to do that we can't do on our own. John Lewis, the late congressman from Georgia, crossed the Samuel Pettis bridge because God was with him. Gandhi and his *satyagrahis* liberated India from British rule because God gave them the strength to endure all that entailed. They took the mantle of God's will upon themselves and with that, they had the authority of God. They spoke and acted by, for and in God. God gave them the strength to do what needed doing, and gave holy authority to all that they did. How? That is what we are talking about today.

Thanks be to God it is not that dramatic for most of us, most of the time. Well, maybe it is. Imagine if everyone had the holy fire of a Gandhi, a Mr. Lewis, or Dr. King... It would be a different world overnight. Isn't that what the commonwealth of God is, everyone being and acting as God would have us be and act? So yes, actually, we are all called to self-sacrifice if not downright martyrdom, but that's a leap from where I know I am. I have known very few people who have really done everything we are called to do for the sake of others, very few. The lesson, though, is certainly not "don't bother," the lesson is that we need to take it day by day, easy does it, a slow start. Start where you are and go from there, or as I like to say, baby steps to the kingdom of God. Because we've got a long way to go.

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Let's look at the Gospel. So Jesus is in Capernaum. He enters the synagogue and teaches, and the people were amazed, astounded. Why? "For He taught as them as one having authority, not as the scribes."

"Scribes" was a pejorative term for the Pharisees. Think bean counters for accountants, pin heads for analysts. The Pharisees were not all bad, not by a long shot, but they were legalistic in their approach. A question like "How many angels could balance on the head of a pin?" might have occupied their fancy. The implication is that there was no original thought, nothing new, certainly noting important, being said. Think of academia. It always rubbed me wrong that so many academic papers would be 30 pages of compare and contrast the ideas of generations of scholars on minute points to make a case for a tiny slice of new knowledge, of something relevant to the world which was too often expressed in the last paragraph. The scribes had no heart. They made technical arguments, but without real authority. You know, the muse, imagination, creativity, which is, of course, after life itself, is the best gift of our Creator God. That is real authority.

Authority. Jesus taught from His heart. Remember the scene in the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke's gospel? Jesus read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing...'

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

That's pretty serious. Jesus was pretty serious. He embraced, fully, the authority He was given. Sometimes that could come across as presumptuous, few prophets are loved at the height of their prophetic careers. When Jesus said the words above in Nazareth, remember what happened? They tried to throw Him off a cliff.

So how did Jesus do it? How did He fully embrace the will of God that had been revealed to Him? Well, you might say, He was God! True. He certainly is and He was fully human, too. One of the things I am learning in the Ignatian retreat I am in is that in getting to know Jesus, it is perhaps more fruitful for us to focus on the human side of Jesus and less on His divine nature because He is knowable as a human in very different ways we can know Him as God Incarnate. Maybe we should focus on His identity as *A* not *The* son of God, focus on His fully human knowledge of self and all. He was an extraordinary person. We can emulate extraordinary people, while emulating God can seem fanciful is not impertinent.

Because you know what, we are supposed to be like Jesus, like the fully human man in history who brought God's will to bear so purely, so perfectly, that the world was saved. That is a way to consider Christ's human ministry, which makes it one we can follow. Paul teaches this mimicry of Jesus very clearly, "Let the same mind be in you who was in Christ Jesus..." That is the formula of self-emptying, of the Christian self-sacrifice we are called to. Jesus Christ is a model of life, "Go and do likewise..."

So, how did Jesus do it? How did He follow God's will so completely? That is one of those endless questions, and maybe should be left as a rhetorical one, but there are two things that really stand out for me today that might be helpful to us in this moment.

First off, Jesus was a lot of things. Among the most important human qualities exemplified in Him is His *all in-ness*. He was all in in everything He did.

He taught from His heart, which was as open to the world (and God) as much as any human heart has ever been. So His teachings were True, but more so, His whole pattern of life was, too. His mendicant wanderings “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” holding all of their money in a common purse; living on the generosity of others; rejecting His family for the cause, “Here are my mother and my brothers.” Oh, and the Cross. All in.

Are you familiar with Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement and all around holy hell raiser? She was all in. Her life was spent living among the most vulnerable people in New York city; she had nothing and wanted for nothing. If you are looking for a great Lenten read, check out *The Long Loneliness*, Day’s stunning autobiography. There are so many others. Mother Theresa. Oscar Romero. The Berrigan brothers. Each of these Saints’ (or future saints’) entire patterns of life demonstrated that their missions, their lives were lived in accordance with the will of God. We can’t make the kind of commitments to others that we need to make, we can’t love, *agape*, boundless divine love without a power beyond ourselves, so doing that, living, loving all in like that, like Jesus and His saints did and do is a clear (and convincing) sign of possessing the authority of God. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” So you want to bear God’s authority, try being all in.

The second lesson we can learn from Jesus about following God’s will was that He was very open, crucify-ably open about whose authority He was working under: God’s! For too many Episcopalians, claiming our religiosity, our knowledge of God as a motivation is nearly as unthinkable as inviting someone to church! Yikes! “What would they think?” (I suspect it is a sympathetic reaction, as too many of us would be horrified if someone invited us to their church). Jesus, though, had no bones about admitting why He did what He did. He laid the authority of everything He did squarely on God. He had no bones giving credit to whence *He* knew as the source of His authority. “God made me do it!”

I’ll tell my call story some day, but it came on pretty suddenly, like out of nowhere, and it wasn’t the voice of God, but more like God’s laser pointer that directed me in no uncertain terms where I was supposed to go: ordained ministry. I began my journey to ordination in the good care of the Unitarians, God bless their hearts. As I was beginning the process I told my call story to a prominent UU pastor, and he looked askance at me and said, “Well, that’s convenient, they can’t argue with that.” Actually, no, you can’t. If you really believe that God made you do it, embrace

that. If what you know, you know is from God, rest into those ever-open arms, take on the mantle of the Almighty. That is one of the ways God's Word enters the world, through those who truly hear it. They really can't argue with that.

But it can also give you strength, handing over the responsibility to God. I quit drinking some years ago. I won't share the gory details, actually, they weren't very gory, I wasn't an alcoholic, but I saw writing on the walls. But still, it was hard to quit, hard to admit to others that I wasn't drinking any more. (What would they think)? So what did I do? I quit under the cover of God; of Lent to be precise. I gave up drinking for Lent because, that's acceptable, socially. I would say, "I gave up drinking for Lent." When Lent ended, I had had a lot of practice saying that, I just dropped the Lent, "I gave up drinking." God didn't make me do it, but God gave me the strength to admit that it wasn't up to me, much of anything, it was up to God, it was just up to me to say yes (or at least stop saying no).

Teaching with authority, God's authority, as Jesus did in Capernaum, means teaching with the power to bring the world back in line with God's will. Acting with authority, God's authority, means acting with the power to bring the world back in line with God's will. You, we, all would-be followers of Jesus Christ have it in us, in truth are charged by virtue of our Baptismal Covenant to witness, act, teach proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ with the very authority of God. Be all in. Blame/give credit to God for what you do. With God on our side, who can be against us?

AMEN