

YOUR CROWN

Texts on Sunday, May 29, 2011

John 14: 15-27; Acts 17: 16-35

Did you ever get the lecture from your seven year old that starts something like this: “No, Dad, you’re wrong. The Teacher told me . . .”? Your nuance on your child’s facts and even your certainty that the Teacher would take your side in the matter matter not. The really big fact is that through her trust in her teacher, the child has found a channel of authority which is not you. That’s the point. It is a big step in her development, to discover new authorities. May it not be the last.

Yet for a lot of people, the child’s pleasure in finding new truths turns in adulthood to exhaustion at uncertainty and ambiguity. Refusing to admit it was a choice, many fix on a single, ultimate authority—and arrest their development. For some, the fix is on their father. In the old days, the king carried this crown. In a cult, the leader has the last word. Astonishingly, that sad old man predicting the end of days got his authority over terrified subjects merely by claiming that he reckoned the dates from The Bible. Ah, the Bible—like a ball-and-chain on arrested development for some; for others like wings on a divine updraft. The Protestant reformers pulled the pope down from power by the power of Spirit and the Word, but before long, most Protestants thrust human authority right back onto their preachers and teachers, enforcing a scriptural literalism worthy of the Taliban. Power to the people? Many just don’t want it. How ready they are to hand over their rights and their crown if only some authority will promise them rest!

Those who mock religion and its adherents usually lay just this claim, that it is a system of blind obedience to arbitrary authority, a coping mechanism for people who can’t stand the openness and plurality of humanity. Of course they are right that some large number of religious adherents do indeed lean on their scriptures and their teachers to wall them off from the world as it is. But when the mockers assert that faith and scriptures actually *cause* people to arrest their development, they go far wide of anything they know. In his popular book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris wrote: “The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the inside.” (p. 17) Richard Dawkins piled on in *The God Delusion* (p. 263): “The holy books do not supply any rules for distinguishing the good principles from the bad.” They could not be farther from the truth. The keys of freedom and means to distinguish good spirits from evil are here in plain sight. Consider the gospel of John.

John differs very widely from the other gospels. Through years of reading

and questioning, many of you know this difference. Yet even a casual perusal of the gospels will reveal the surprise. There is no birth story in John's gospel, and no parables; there are lots of metaphors—even mixed metaphors, as Dr. Lundblad offered here recently; but no last supper; a last foot-washing instead; a speech from the last night so extended that no mind could have caught it all. And this: in the cross, as John tells it, there is no agony for Jesus, but only victory. Almost nothing from the other gospels is shared by John; almost nothing from John is in the others. Where did *John* come from?

Many solutions to the puzzle aim to preserve John's stories as histories—as doings done and speeches spoken as neatly as the nightly news. But such solutions ignore what John tells the church quite plainly: from beginning to end, every word of his gospel came to him wholly spiritually, Holy Spiritually. You heard the gospel lesson. Jesus is saying, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." John wrote this story for his church, to help them. Now he shows them the key which he himself has used to unlock knowledge of Christ, though Christ is absent in body. "The Holy Spirit will teach you everything." Not the book, but the Spirit.

John knows that the generation who knew Jesus is passing away. He feels their anxiety to have access to authority—to the holy man Jesus and to those who once knew him. He knows they are afraid of the future, when no one will have so much as a piece of Jesus' garment to remember him by. How insubstantial we are. How like a mist of the morning. John knows.

But he has been taken beyond this material anxiety. He has experienced the presence of Christ through the power of God Holy Spirit. He trusts that this flow of divine power has revealed to him how to live and to love in community, just as Jesus commanded. He knows that this living reality of the loving church is Christ's body. This is the living Word. Love is the bread and the truth and the light. So, from the depths of his inward witness to the living Christ, he writes a story, wholly spiritually, to help his church. Its source is not a reporter's notebook, but the heart and soul of an apostle, passing on his inner experience of Christ using the only vessel that humans have which is able to carry the flame of uttermost value from generation to generation—a story. Do not trust your most precious gifts for the ages to essays or sermons or web sites or music or any art without a story.

We still tell it. And for the same reason John wrote it—that is, to help his church in their hardest struggles. John knew that if his church would survive—would have anything at all to give to another generation—they must get beyond fears and facts, relics and religion and tradition. They must get to love. Every other reason for being part of a church is too insignificant to

last. Only love abides. That is why John wrote. That is how he wrote: wholly in the Spirit of love. He accepted his crown—that is, his own authority to say and to show Christ for the world. Will you accept yours?

Do you want it? We began our sermon by observing that a lot of people do not want their crown. They want their religion to tell them what is true, tell them what to think, tell them how to practice is and what to do. God knows, through all the centuries the church has often colluded with its people to persuade them that hero worship is the main purpose of the church: *Guilt and self-reproach for me, honor and glory to Thee . . .* Yet I defy anyone to find one word from the gospels where Jesus himself demands such of the faithful! This error keeps everything locked down, the Spirit unable to breathe. The tragedy of the distortion cannot be overstated. Page through any hymnal in search of those songs by which we commit ourselves in faith to do a good, hard thing versus those songs that thank Jesus for saving us from having to do anything and you will taste something sour, something not found in the gospels. When John's Jesus says, "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything"—are you ready to accept your own authority to interpret Christ for the world. Or will you say, *Well, I suppose John could do that, because he was a saint, he had a halo, he had a crown—but not I—who am I?* No! A full reading of the gospel puts your crown on your head, requiring of you your full authority to decide how Christ shall come by you to birth into the world. Take your crown.

Paul did. There he was in Athens, touring the Parthenon. That building was already 500 years old when he stood among its statues. Now, Jews then as now, confidently affirmed the antiquity and authority of their own tradition in whatever land where they dwelled. Still, in Paul's time, the Jerusalem temple, by contrast with Athens', was under construction. Therefore, re-imagine the boldness of Paul to challenge the authority and antiquity of Greece not with his Jewish story but with this newish story of Christ raised from the dead. And see too how he made his challenge—not in flat opposition, not condemning, not despising, but open, even admiring. "I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.'" Not only then had Paul the inner authority to challenge an ancient tradition which seemed to him moribund, but also the spirit to speak in a way others could hear. This gift, to relate the good word of God to others in ways they can hear is the main default of the mainline religion in its rigid adherence to moribund ways in worship and teaching. To ask for this gift is exactly what we mean by commending you to take your own crown of authority to interpret Christ for the world. In part it is about

speaking truth, judging whatever institutions exist, including those of the church, according to the light God gives you. In part, it is letting Holy Spirit remind you how to do so in love. Let us not say that that was fine for Paul's time, but not mine. Don't push him up on a pedestal. Take your crown.

Someone might feel anxious about taking so much authority to interpret the scriptures, to judge the church and its practices, to call tyrants and demagogues to account. *What if I'm wrong?* she might reasonably and humbly ask. *Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.* When you speak your word through Christ's body, the church will test the spirit, just as it did of John's gospel and of Paul's letters. Do not suppose that these writings and challenges instantly gained respect because their authors were authorities. To the contrary: this whole Bible has been slowly put together by the people its authors aimed to help, and by their children and their children's children, asking that this or that passage be read, and read again. Whether what you are moved to say and to do has in it the power of God Holy Spirit is not yours to judge. The church and its generations will judge.

Only let this be plain. If the idols we worship can be named, if the habits and patterns which block the Holy Spirit can be removed, if the rigid laws we call sacrosanct can be laid down, if the Word of God we have ignored can be lifted up, the only power that can move against these with endurance and strength is love. Only love can discern idolatry, for only love is at peace with itself, undefended, not anxious or threatened, but confident and safe, sure, as the Psalmist says, that "the Lord is your keeper; your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all evil; he will keep your life." Love is that security which can endure anything and dissolve all error.

Beloved in Christ, take your crown. Hold on to nothing arbitrary. Let the past be the past, that God's future may be revealed in love and service to the stranger. Love is that one sign, the star above that shows where Christ is next to be born in the church that is living and taking its crown to tell the story for a whole world.

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."
Amen.

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