

“Question Authority?”  
Jeremiah 29: 5-7, Romans 13:1-13;  
Matt 22:15-22

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First Presbyterian Church of Moscow  
Pastor Norman Fowler

When I started this whole sermon series, I started with thinking about personal identity and how it shapes our lives, and how our faith is the place where we begin to recognize that we have an identity we can hold on to—identity in Christ, through Christ, for Christ. And as we begin to follow Christ, we recognize that Christ leads us into relationships, and those relationships are important to us, and they're important in terms of what Christ calls us to do. We talked last week about these direct relationships we have with friends and family and co-workers, this sense of family we have that grows among us as followers of Christ in the church, together.

So when I had this all planned, I was thinking we started from self, from identity, and then went into this second sphere of relationships, and then thought about this wider sphere of relationships that we're in. Today we're thinking about that wider sphere, and I had no idea back at the beginning of September, when I decided that we were going to look at the wider spheres, that we would be in the middle of a crisis in that wider sphere. Maybe it's just God's humor or something. We are not only in relationship with the people we can see, eye to eye, face to face, we are in relationship with a wider community. We live in Moscow. We know we're part of this community. We live in Idaho, we know we're in some ways part of that community; we live in the United States, we know we're part of that community. We live in this world: today we have a better idea than ever of how much we are part of the citizenry of a globe. Where does our faith take us in relationship to that? I think for me that is a question that I struggle with, partly because I think that the society that I grew up in suggested that in that wider situation it's just problematic: that there is some kind of authority or some kind of control, that it influences my life and so that I should always just question authority.

What do I do with that sense that I am part of something larger and that in some way that something larger then influences me, has some authority in my life, and affects me in some way? Do I simply question it? You noticed perhaps in the confession that I suggested that sometimes we seem to be in the place where we question things so much that the only thing that seems to have any authority today is the individual. But does that work?

I want to return to scripture, because I was thinking back to a scripture we read earlier this fall about Moses, and how he was beginning to be overcome with trying to judge all the issues between his people, and it was overwhelming. He couldn't do it. His father-in-law actually came along and said “You're not doing this very well, you can't do it all, you can't do it alone.” And Moses admitted it. And so what they did was begin to form a way for Moses to take only the most important cases and then distribute the rest. He gave authority to good people in each of the tribes and clans so that they could make decisions on the smaller matters. We see a beginning of that distribution of authority:

when we get together as a group we begin to have to create ways of doing things together. Not even Moses could do it all.

We think of Moses as the first prophet, and then we look at the other prophets that come along. And what did they do? Did they come along and say “You have no right to have the authority you do”? No, they really didn’t do that. What they said was, “You’re misusing your authority. There is a right thing to do here, and you’re not doing it.” They were inviting the people together, through their authority--through their king, at the time—to do what was right. Jeremiah is an interesting case, because in some ways his whole prophecy is about letting go of your sovereignty and accepting the sovereignty of the Babylonians. It’s a jarring piece of scripture for me. And then he writes this letter to the people who have been taken away into Babylon and says “Care about the city you’re in. Be planted there. Throw in your lot with theirs.” That’s a hard thing to hear, because so much of the time we focus on our tribe. And even in reading scripture we often think it’s about the people of Israel. Yet and then we have a book like Jonah, which is a crazy book, not just because he gets swallowed by a whale—that’s really minor. What it’s really about is Jonah being told to go to Nineveh, this city that nobody in Israel liked, to save them from their evil ways. And so the whole story is about him, Jonah, not wanting to do what God wants him to do because he’s afraid they’ll actually repent, and they do, and then he gets mad at God. He wanted them destroyed. I love the end of Jonah because God said “What was I supposed to do? Here are a hundred-thousand people and all these cattle,” suggesting perhaps that God doesn’t care just for the human beings that were there. But he cared about this “other.” So we see as we walk our way through that God cares not only about us and how we form our relationships but in a sense about the “other.” We can sometimes think that in a sense we have our own community and there are these “other” communities. Well, God cares about them too. Or we can think about our state, or our nation. God cares about us all, and within that enables us to set up authority, ways of living our life together. We have to do it.

Jesus, I think, is acknowledging that when these guys come to try to trap him. “Look, give the Emperor the coin that belongs to him, and remember to pay God what is God’s.” And we’ll get to that, maybe next week. But Jesus is acknowledging the authority. Even if we watch Jesus walk through the end of his life, as he’s confronting the authorities, the only time he really gets mad at the authorities is in temple, when they’re turning the temple into a den of thieves, right? But when he goes before the Sanhedrin, he goes before Pilate, he doesn’t say, “Your authority is illegitimate.” I think if you read the story, really what he’s saying is “You’re misusing your authority.” But there’s a legitimate authority, and what we have to remember is that authority is really limited as well, its bounded.

But today we’re thinking about the authority God has given us. We look in on Paul. Some of us really don’t like those verses because he’s telling us to pay taxes. He’s telling us to live within the society, the governance of the place we are. Sure, Paul was probably struggling a little bit because this upstart religion was beginning to be noticed by authorities and he was trying to say, “We’re not doing anything that isn’t good,” so

there is that side of it. The other side of it is, he's telling his listeners "You live the city", just like in Jeremiah, in a way. "its lot is your lot. You're together in this." Now he does, I think, suggest as he goes through, if you do what's right, you should have no problem. I think that works the other way too. If the governance isn't letting people do what's right, then there's probably something wrong with the governance. But, he is acknowledging the legitimacy of the authority, in fact if you read that first line of the scripture we read today it sounds a little bit like he's saying "The people are in place have been placed by God," and reading the Greek I think he's saying a little bit more: "We have people who have been put in place, we have governing entities, and they have been given authority." That is, there is an appropriate authority there, and we live within it. So as much as I'm often a product of my own upbringing and want to question all authority, I think that I have to realize that there is legitimate authority. It's not a question of the legitimacy of authority, it's a question whether it's being used correctly, well. Is it doing what is appropriate? Is it allowing us to be people who can do good, do the will of God?

Just one final thing I want to note is, it's interesting where Paul goes. He says, "if you owe taxes, pay taxes, if you owe revenue pay revenue, if you owe respect, pay respect; if you owe honor, give honor." And then he says, "You owe nothing, except to love others." Which makes me wonder, how can he do that? What has he just said? Is it that when I owe taxes, I'm owing a certain amount of love? When I'm owing revenue, when I'm owing respect, when I'm owing honor? Because I don't owe anything but love, he says. That's a challenging thing for me to think about. I usually don't think of my taxes in any way of a being a gift of love. And yet Paul says owe no one anything but love, but pay your taxes, respect authority. Really what he's telling us I think is figure out what I can do, what's my piece? So often I just want to say it's the government that's the problem and I think Paul's looking back at me and saying what's your role? And I often don't want to hear that. How am I living out what I owe? How am I giving the love that has been given me, and respecting that we live together in this complex crazy world and we create authority so we can get along together, figure it out together. And we hope and pray that the people who are in authority can figure out how to get it all together. Because it makes a difference for us that we might live out and do the good that we're called to do.

Prayer:

Gracious God, you have called us into so much. First of all you give us the gift of Grace that we might begin to recognize we are your children and we can be in relationship with you and that you invite us into a relationship with each other and through it all you invite us into the complexity of this life. You invite us to simply try to do the good you show us in the midst of the ups and downs, the ins and outs of our world, and Lord, we ask that you lead us, help us see how doing what's right, perhaps even paying our taxes can be a gift of love because you have loved us. It's amazing. Lord, the way you enter and call us and lead us. Continue to expand our vision to be able to see more and more from your perspective, the way we might live. Through Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.