Sermon Epiphany 7 final

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## Attention

Having heard the words that we have just read from scripture, I wonder what the right reaction is?

We might just reflect that all those passages sure sound familiar. “I’ve heard those before.” It would be entirely appropriate to have some questions. A few years ago, the dean of Harvard graduate school of Education began speaking and writing about questions that really matter.

Wait, what? I wonder? What truly matters? How can I help?

Over 100 years ago GK Chesterton wrote,

the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.

For much of what we read in the Bible, as well as in the later Christian tradition, I think the best response we can make is to ask questions. Some of you have heard me tell the story about a young Jewish student living in a remote village centuries ago, shouting at the top of his lungs as he ran down the muddy street in his village,

I’ve got the answer! I’ve got the answer! Quick somebody tell me the question!

What do we pay attention to? What do we let flow in one ear and out the other? And when do we stop and ask “Wait? What? What truly matters? Who and what do we take as authority? Who do we listen to? Who points us in the direction we follow in our life?

I looked it up, – I googled it, so it must be true – right? I looked it up and it said the middle class spends about 33% of our income on housing, about 17% on transportation, 13% on food and 13% on insurance and pensions. The left over is *crazy money* I guess.

I thought about that a little bit, and I thought those percentages don’t apply to the poor people that I have known. I have known some really poor people – on Lower Wacker Drive in Chicago and especially the poor people who lived in *Stadium Park* just down from my church in Honolulu. They don’t have much in the way of money. e.g. Susan would regularly ask me to buy her a double cheeseburger at the McDonalds right across the street. Houseless people don’t have lots of money, but they have a lot of time -– well, actually they have the same amount of time you and I have. But they spend energy getting food and drink to survive the day. They typically wouldn’t have to pay money for shelter, because they don’t have shelter. They have to be ingenious in finding something to keep the rain and snow, the heat and cold, the violent criminals, all while not getting arrested or beat up.

On the other hand, as you may well be aware, wealth in this country has shifted over the last several generations.

From the Pew Research Center, I read that:

The growth and income in recent decades has tilted to upper income households. At the same time, the US middle class, which once comprise, the clear majority of Americans, is shrinking. Thus, a greater share of the nations aggregate income is now going to upper income households and the share going to middle and lower income households has fallen.

## Love

To those of you who are still with me, I want to say that **I think Jesus cares about those kinds of things.**

Chesterton said:

To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything seems hopeless.

Wait, what? Who is our authority?

Where do we get the information on which we base the course of our lives? Where do we spend our money? How do we make those decisions? At times when I take my own concerns too seriously I remember another thing Chesterton said:

Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly.

Actually, though, while taking myself lightly, I quite serious, too. I actually believe that Jesus did the same thing. Jesus could play – some of the passages in the gospels only make sense if we realize Jesus is being playful. I used to keep a picture of a **smiling Jesus** just to remind me that a part of his authority is that he was so human. But about this love thing and this care for the poor thing, he seems to be quite serious.

When I was just sorting out how to be serious about my Christian faith, my priest took me on 1000 mile trip to spend a long weekend listening to Archbishop Michael Ramsey give a talk at the Nashotah house on **authority in the gospels of the New Testament**. I was smitten by what he had to say about **authority**, in the Greek *exousia*, enough so that I later went to the Nashotah house for seminary and my life has never been the same since.

The Greek word used for “authority” – *exousia* – literally has to do with what “rightly comes out of **being**.” An illustration:

An acorn has the **exousia**, the authority, to become an oak tree. The word means both that kind of authority and the kind of authority that exercises power.

There’s a story that some of you may remember hearing me tell previously. I have told it often because it motivates me on a regular basis to sort out what’s important and what’s not.

During the civil wars in feudal Japan, an invading army would quickly sweep into a town and take control. In one particular village, everyone fled just before the army arrived - everyone except the Zen monk. Curious about this old fellow, the general went to the temple to see for himself what kind of man this monk was. When he wasn’t treated with the deference and submissiveness to which he was accustomed, the general burst into anger. “You fool,” he shouted as he reached for his sword, “don’t you realize you are standing before a man who could run you through without blinking an eye!” But despite the threat, the master seemed unmoved. “And do you realize,” the master replied calmly, “that you are standing before a man who can let you run me through without blinking an eye?”[[1]](#footnote-2)

## Paying attention

We pay attention to a bewildering amount of voices claiming to be authoritative. We make choices that affect people’s lives, even unto life and death, on the basis of what we take to be authoritative.

Who are the authorities that we listen to? Authorities that change our lives? Right from wrong. How do we decide? Chesterton said,

**“The word”good” has many meanings. For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.”**

He also said,

**To have a right to do a thing is not at all the same as to be right in doing it**.

For some of us the political decision-making at work around us has seemed to turn the world upside down. For good or for ill. But, perhaps, we take political decisions too seriously, Chesterton said about that,

The whole modern world has divided itself into Conservatives and Progressives. The business of Progressives is to go on making mistakes. The business of Conservatives is to prevent mistakes from being corrected.

At least one authority, however, has said,

“I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

## We and Them

Who is the we and who is the they? That’s an important question. Jesus thought it was important, too, at least the gospel writers thought so.

Wait? What?

It’s so easy to hear what we’ve always heard and not hear that the lesson may be something other than the bland familiar phrase that we’ve heard over and over. It might reflect an authority that we need to pay attention to. If it’s true it’s important. If it’s not true why bother with it? Chesterton said,

**“Fallacies do not cease to be fallacies because they become fashions.”**

He also said,

“There’s a lot of difference between listening and hearing.”

Wait? What?

It happened to me with regard to the first reading just this week. Always before I had heard that as a lesson about a family finally being reunited. There’s all the drama that went before with brothers against brothers and dreams that got you into jail and out of jail . The reversal of destiny and all that good stuff.

What I realized just this past couple of weeks is that the Joseph passage is also an Old Testament version of what we call the parable of the Good Samaritan. Reading the great Saga of Joseph, at the time of the passage we heard today, Joseph has become fully Egyptian. He is a stranger, a foreigner to his biological brothers. Egyptians and Canaanites had a long history of not getting along. But as we heard today, Joseph recognizes these strangers and beggars from a foreign land as **family**.

Oh my, strangers and beggars are actually family.

Jesus said,

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.”

Chesterton said,

“The Bible tells us to love our neighbors, and also to love our enemies; probably because generally they are the same people.”

But that’s just Chesterton. It’s not like Jesus said it.

## True authority

Asking the right questions will tell us what is worthwhile and what is not. We will discover what is our true authority if **we ask the right questions**.

Early Christians wrote a centuries-long-history of having the Roman empire imprison them, execute them, banish them. It took over 3 centuries for Christians to become friends with the empire. Something about those Christians. Their reputation was that they took care of widows and orphans. They refused to be soldiers for the empire. They wouldn’t lavish praise on the people and practices that **everybody** flocked to at the Coliseum and such.

Then all of a sudden Christians became friends with the empire.

I wonder about how we got to where we are. I ask, “What would Jesus do?” “But at the same time I ask forcefully, ‘What shall I do?’” I wonder and I search for hope. I am sustained by the miracles about me. Chesterton said,

**“The world will never starve for want of wonders; but only for want of wonder.”** **“The most incredible thing about miracles is that they happen.”** **“The most extraordinary thing in the world is an ordinary man and an ordinary woman and their ordinary children.”**

He said also,

“Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair.”

I am sustained by the heroes who found their authority in Jesus and not in the voice of the culture. People like Dorothy Day who saw Christ in all persons, even the diseased beggar she invited to sleep in her bed when he showed up late at night. People like Franz Jäggerstätter, an Austrian farmer who died because he believed that the regime surrounding him was contrary to his Christian faith.

That’s just me and sometimes I’m foolish enough to think I could fly. Jesus said,

A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Another person, I don’t remember who, said,

The only things in life that are worthwhile are what you give away.

Chesterton said,

**“If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.”**

So, even if you do it badly,

“I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

In the 70’s and 80’s one of my heroes – well, I guess he still is – was Harry Chapin. He died young. I thought he was an amazing story-teller. And he was committed to feeding the hungry. (I guess he was a little like Jesus.) After he died, there was a concert at Carnegie Hall where lots of famous singers sang his songs as a memorial. One of them was Bruce Springsteen. (I feel a kind of personal connection with him too.) In the midst of the song, Springsteen told a story about how Harry told him about how he did one concert for himself and then the next one “for the other guy.” He gave away ½ his earnings to feed the hungry. Springsteen said that while he wasn’t as generous and courageous as Harry was he admired and believed in his cause.

At the end of the song he paused, and said, “Now … go and do something.”

1. This is an old Japanese Zen story. https://www.reddit.com/r/ramdass/comments/qrn0tz/im\_trying\_to\_remember\_a\_story\_about\_a\_monk\_and\_a/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)