

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 27, 2020 – A Question of Authority
Philippians 2:1-11 and Matthew 21:23-32

“Confirmation bias is the tendency to take in only data that confirms a prior conviction and to discount information that does not conform to what we already believe.”¹ In other words, “When a person receives new information that contradicts a long-held belief,” the theory of confirmation bias suggests that “the individual will make every effort to reject the information.”² “He or she will try to discredit the information by discrediting the source (‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’) or by questioning the authority of the source,” as we see in our second lesson this morning, where the chief priests and elders ask Jesus to defend his legitimacy in front of a large crowd, saying, “By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority?”³

Researchers who study confirmation bias “have shown that if a belief is strongly held, even overwhelming evidence is unlikely to bring about a change of mind.”⁴ This is because “the further away from one’s current point of view” some new piece of information is, “the less likely one is to accept it.”⁵ Once we recognize

¹ Shawnthea Monroe, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 350.

² Monroe, 350.

³ Monroe, 350.

⁴ Monroe, 350.

⁵ Monroe, 350.

this, it becomes much easier to understand not only why our current political environment is so entrenched, but also why, in our second lesson this morning, “it was so hard for the chief priests and elders to accept what Jesus was teaching.”⁶ You see, “It was not simply that they did not want to lose power or position,” though this was surely a part of the equation.⁷ Just as importantly, the new information Jesus offered was too far removed from their own, strongly held beliefs for them to readily accept the natural conclusion that Jesus was the Son of God.⁸

I recognize how easy it is for us to judge the chief priests and the elders harshly. Throughout this passage, the irony is thick. In their role as religious authorities, “they claim to be faithfully obedient to God,” yet “they are blind to the fact that authentic obedience includes responding in faith to the new things God is doing.”⁹ As we ponder that for a moment, we may also begin to empathize with them. For as people who wrestle daily with own faith, we, too, have denied, and discounted, and rejected, and vilified the things that are of God. And so, we may rightfully ask, if we had come face-to-face with Jesus, would we also have turned our backs on the messiah? I wonder.

⁶ Monroe, 350.

⁷ Monroe, 350.

⁸ Monroe, 350.

⁹ Douglas R.A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 247

In the Presbyterian Church, when we speak of a minister's call, we are talking about something that is complex and multi-faceted. An individual is said to sense a personal call from God to pursue ordained ministry. This sense of internal call must then be affirmed by one's congregation and presbytery, which are each involved in the discernment process. The individual must apply and be accepted to study at a seminary or divinity school where graduate education is expected. There are field placement assignments, psychological evaluations, clinical pastoral education requirements, and ordination exams. And at the end of all of that, the individual must then interview for available positions, be selected by a search committee, and affirmed by the congregation, the Committee on Ministry, and the presbytery in which the congregation is located.

Clearly, ours is a lengthy and orderly process that is not without challenge. What happens, for example, if things break down at any point along the way? Well, the search continues in earnest, as committee members and candidates hope and pray that the process we have put into place will bear the fruit of God's intentions for the church.

In our second lesson this morning, we find familiar dynamics at play. Here, there is “a tension between the authority of the Jewish leaders, that of John the Baptist, the sway of the crowd, and Jesus.”¹⁰ The authority of the Jewish leaders is not in question. Instead, Jesus’ challenge the “hypocrisy and corruption of their performance.”¹¹ In doing so, he leans into the curiosity and affirmation of the crowd who display an openness to the possibility of his divine origins.

To put it mildly, this squabble about the nature of God’s intentions is very, very messy. Jesus has disrupted the entire process by presenting an alternative “understanding of the way God works and who God is.”¹² Questions of legitimacy and due process rise to the surface, as the religious leaders ask, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?”

In his book, *As One with Authority*, Jackson Carroll writes that “authority is *legitimate* power. When individuals in a group consent to the directives of a leader or to the mandates of the group’s constitution or to the teachings of Scripture, for example, they are acknowledging that authority – the right – of the leader, constitution, or Scripture to give direction to the group’s life. They comply with the

¹⁰ Whitney Bodman, *Connections, A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, ed. Joel B. Green (Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 349.

¹¹ Bodman, 349.

¹² Monroe, 350.

directives of the authoritative person or cultural object because they believe them to be consistent with the core values, beliefs and purposes of the group.”¹³ Ultimately, individuals comply “because they accept the legitimacy of the one making the demand and believe that compliance is for the good of the whole.”¹⁴

But we don't always comply, even when the request is in the best interest of everyone involved. Rather than answering his questioners directly, Jesus chooses to respond to them with a parable. A father had two sons, he tells them. “He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I will not’; but later changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir’; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?”

The point here is that while we may not fully understand the manner in which God is at work among us, we may be surprised by ones who will show up and do the will of the One who presents the call. The process that unfolds may be formal or informal, and accompanied by ordination or a different professional vocation entirely. What matters is not merely that we affirm with our lips that God is at work,

¹³ Jackson W. Carroll, *As One with Authority: Reflective Leadership in Ministry* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 27.

¹⁴ Carroll, 27.

but that we demonstrate our commitment with a mind open to new possibilities, and the offering of our lives in service of God.

Friends, with the world and church turned upside down on account of COVID-19, I invite you to consider what new things God is preparing for us in the midst of this transition. To ponder how we are being challenged to think about ministry differently. And to see in the present moment an opportunity for reformation as we seek the face of Christ. May God be with you, with Westminster, and with the church universal, that we may recognize the Lordship of Christ even now. May it be so, and all thanks be to God. Amen.