

Pentecost 17A (9/24/17)

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Psalm 25:1-9

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

“By what authority are you doing these things?” This is a perennially relevant question for people of faith. What motivates us, why, and for what purpose? Our allegiance is divided, yet Emmanuel wins our final allegiance by humbling himself for our sake. Every knee should bend at his name because he has first bent himself to us. Thus, the divine model of humility and sacrifice shapes our relationships, turning us toward each other in loving attentiveness.

“Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.”

“...so that at *the name of Jesus* every knee should bend.”

“...*every knee should bend.*”

In our Gospel from Matthew today, the chief priests and the elders, keepers of the religious status quo, dispense with all the murmuring and scheming¹ and finally confront Jesus outright: “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” In other words, *how dare you upset the order of things with your newfangled teaching and healing and promise of a new way of life? Our claim to power is based on generations of standard practice. What about yours?*

True to form, Jesus doesn’t meet their demand for a simple answer. But, we who are familiar with the events of his life – who have the privilege of knowing him from the beginning – we know the answer. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel called in a dream, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy

¹ E.g. 9:3, 12:14.

Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”² Years later, another heavenly voice rang out over the River Jordan: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”³ **This is no arrogant upstart, no self-aggrandizing pretender – this is none other than Emmanuel, God-with-us. And, his purpose to renew a “harassed and helpless”⁴ human community carries nothing less than divine authority.**

Nevertheless, the question of the chief priests and the elders – “By what authority are you doing these things?” – is a perennially relevant question for people of faith. It’s a question of devotion: *What motivates you, why, and for what purpose?* For self-proclaimed followers of the rabbi from Nazareth, the answer might seem obvious. But, the truth is that our allegiance is divided. Family, community, tradition, political philosophy, nation – all these and others claim a share of our hearts, making varying demands on us in the name of loyalty.

The call of Christian discipleship, however, makes the ultimate claim. According to the ancient hymn the Apostle Paul quotes in our second reading from Philippians, God has exalted the name of Jesus above every other name for this purpose:

“that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on Earth and under the earth,
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that Jesus Christ is Lord,
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“...that at *the name of Jesus* every knee should bend.”

“...*every knee should bend.*”

Christ Jesus, crucified and risen, wins our final allegiance. But why, and for what purpose? Contrary to what we might expect, his claim to authority does not rest on an

² 1:20-21.

³ 3:17.

⁴ 9:36.

assertion of superiority or dominance. Quite the opposite. **God has exalted Jesus precisely because he has humbled himself for our sake:**

“...he was in the form of God,
[yet he] did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.”

Every knee should bend at the name of Jesus because he has first bent himself to us.⁵

In other words, the divine authority he wields is made known surprisingly in self-emptying love, love that relinquishes all privilege and primacy for the sake of the loved one, or, in the words of one interpreter, “love that burns with desire for the flourishing of others.”⁶

This is how Emmanuel wins our allegiance, setting before us a divine model of humility and sacrifice. “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” Paul insists, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit... Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” **Even as we kneel in honor of our Lord, as disciples of Jesus we also kneel for the sake of our neighbors, and especially our neighbors who are “harassed and helpless.”**

And, speaking of taking a knee...

Did you know that it was the demands of Christian discipleship that motivated Colin Kaepernick and his teammate Eric Reid to kneel during the national anthem last season? Discipleship compelled them to bend down in the sight of others in order to draw attention to the persistence of racism in the United States. At first, Kaepernick chose to sit for the national anthem, but changed his mind after a conversation he had with a veteran. He and

⁵ See William Greenway, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 4, 114.

⁶ Ibid. 110.

Reid opted instead to kneel in order to demonstrate respect for military personnel. Still, the gesture carried a distinct meaning, as Reid recalls in an article last month: “I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy.”⁷

“Kneeling is powerful,” writes The Reverend Angela Denker, former sportswriter turned Lutheran pastor.

To kneel is to show respect. To make a statement. To humble oneself, but also to stand out from the wider world.

It’s hard to be arrogant, or stupid, or prideful, or shortsighted — or any of the things Colin Kaepernick is alternately accused of being — when you are kneeling.

Kneeling points the spotlight away from yourself and on to someone else. It is, as it has been in the church for centuries, a holy act.⁸

Dear church, what motivates you, why, and for what purpose? Jesus humbles himself for our sake, establishing a pattern for human community that supersedes our social conventions or our national pride or any other competing loyalty. Therefore God also highly exalts him. **To kneel at the name of Emmanuel – and in loving attentiveness to the interests of our neighbors – is the holiest act, even and perhaps especially when it upsets the order of things, to the glory of God the Father.**

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/opinion/colin-kaepernick-football-protests.html>.

⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/09/24/colin-kaepernick-and-the-powerful-religious-act-of-kneeling>.