

“The Authority of Hope”

Luke 20:1-8

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We were always told that a New Englander is one who answers a question with a question. Thus, Jesus must have been a New Englander! The scribes ask him, “By what authority do you do these things?” and he replies, “Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men?” So, obviously, Jesus was a New Englander!

Now that that is settled, what really intrigues me about this text is the leading question, “By what authority?” Or in modern language, “Who do you think you are?” By what authority? This is a pressing question for America. If you wear a badge, what authority does that give you? If you wear a uniform, what authority does that give you? If you wear a white cap, what authority does that give you? If you wear a purple stole, what authority does that give you? The question of authority is a pressing question for our time.

I believe Jesus’ authority is grounded in his unrelenting spirit of hopefulness. His authority is not grounded in the clothes he wears; not in the university diploma on his wall; not even in his genealogical lineage that connects him to David and Solomon and Ruth. His authority lies in his undying hope for the world. His hope is not a pie in the sky, blind optimism. His hope is grounded in the mighty deeds of God. He sees that when God blesses bread and fish, there is enough to feed 5000 people. He sees that when God hears the cry of the oppressed, freedom becomes a reality. He sees that when God’s name is invoked swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. He sees that when God drops a plumb line into the midst of a community, justice has a chance to thrive.

He sees that when God blesses the house, even the stranger is welcomed and is offered generous hospitality. His hope is grounded in the mighty deeds of God.

When the scribes pressured him, ‘by what authority do you do these things?’ he might have answered simply, ‘I live in the greatest of hope. That is all the authority I need.’

A few summers ago, I was invited to preach at the Watch Hill Chapel at the Rhode Island shore. At the close of the service, I stood at the front door to greet all the worshipers. One older woman looked me up and down with a disdainful eye and said, “My son is a Congregational minister and he says real Congregationalists don’t wear a robe or a stole.” Though I had an appropriate come-back for her, I knew exactly what her son meant. Our authority as preachers lies not in what we wear on Sunday but on the hope we carry with us into Monday.

Over the last 28 years in this pulpit, I have concluded every single sermon with the words, ‘In the greatest of hope.’ For me, these are not idle words, not merely cute words for wrapping up a theological essay. They are words of authority. They establish the ground of my authority. I am a person who lives by hope. I happen to believe God is still doing mighty deeds of liberation, still multiplying loaves and fish, still using us as instruments of peace, still empowering local churches to be forces of transformation of the human heart.

When Rich Gutt called last week to say he had a field of cabbage and a field of Brussels sprouts and could I find some volunteers to come and glean the vegetables and take them to a soup kitchen, I dropped everything and started making phone calls. Whatever else I had to do that day could wait. I understood Rich’s offer as an invitation to be an instrument of hope. Homeless men would be eating a good meal that night.

Laura Perry and I showed up at the field, divided the labor, shared the tools, and filled the red truck with green food. We hauled it into The Open Hearth on Charter Oak Avenue in Hartford. Three smiling men helped carry the produce into the kitchen. This entire project took less than three hours. Yet, for me, it illustrates how God continues to do mighty deeds of kindness, how God hears the cry of hungry people, how God stirs the heart of a local farmer, how God uses ordinary people to establish extraordinary hope. Had someone stopped us at the front gate of the Open Hearth and demanded to know by what authority we were bringing this good news in the form of cabbages and Brussels sprouts, I would have replied, 'This we do on the authority of hope.' It wasn't about Laura or me. It was about hope.

In lighting an Advent Candle of HOPE, we are announcing by what authority we stand our ground, by what authority we send out our youth on mission trips, by what authority we commission Adults on the Level to repair a roof, by what authority we serve a meal at the South Park Inn, by what authority we pluck an ornament from the Gift of Giving Tree. When we light the Advent Candle of HOPE, we are replying to those who might question our authority: we are grounded in hope; we are the people who believe God is still initiating mighty deeds of liberation and kindness; mighty deeds of feeding and sheltering; mighty deeds of redeeming and reconciling and resurrecting. It is because we know the source of our authority that we all remain in the greatest of hope! Amen!