

By What Authority?¹

I remember well the feeling. I was sitting in a DASH board of directors meeting when it was announced that an organization called "Mission Year" was preparing to send a team of students to spend a year doing mission in LaGrange. My emotional response was this. LaGrange, Georgia says "You can keep your mission. Go somewhere else. If you think you can improve on the churches and social service agencies and government and the Callaway Foundation, you're just wrong." Are you with me on that emotional reaction? I know, we don't say that aloud, but it's the feeling. And, as it always works out, we've had mission year students come, make a fabulous contribution to our community, and even take up residence with us. But I just want to isolate that initial gut reaction.

You see, mission is controversial. We do mission out of this church and I wonder about how it feels to those to whom we reach out. Nineteen of us went to Belize and conducted a Presbyterian vacation Bible school among some kids and did some construction work putting up a school building. How would it feel if Belizean's saw photos of our children and their hearts went out to them because they were so precious and so deprived

¹ Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on October 10, 2010 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia. Additional sermons and other information can be found at www.fpclagranger.org

and they just wanted to send a team here to provide religious education for our kids?

Mission is controversial because it's always political. I don't mean political like republicans and democrats. I mean political because someone can always ask "by what authority do you do these things?" Jesus sends you and me into the world with these words: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them...and teaching them." Well that's just fine in LaGrange, Georgia because we live in a place where most of the population pays preachers to say just that and most of our neighbors are being reminded of that right now. But take those instructions just about anywhere else—say to Saudi Arabia or Nepal, or a public school or wherever and making disciples is against the law. So, by what authority?

Jesus was confronted by this question. We read about an instance when people asked him directly. By what authority do you do these things? We'd say, "Ah, who do you think you are?" You see, Jesus had a way of doing things and saying things that stirred people, especially leaders, to wonder "what makes him think that he is entitled to do that?" You can't just say to someone as if you are God's little brother, "Your sins are forgiven." You can't say, as if you just came down from Mt. Sinai that "Moses said this but here's what he meant." Even the

demons that pounce on people and give them mental illness are angry with Jesus. He can't just order the spirits around. That's spiritual stuff. You don't mess with spooky spiritual stuff unless you're God. So, Jesus, by what authority?

Now we read Jesus' response and we might miss its import. Jesus refers to John the Baptist's practice and fires back what sounds like a trick question, "What was John's authority?" The chief priests and scribes and elders are momentarily silenced and Jesus says, "Well, if you've got nothing to say, neither do I." We think, "Yeah, Jesus, you tricked them again." But what we miss is that Jesus, in fact, not only tricked them but also told them about the authority he was operating under. Remember Jesus' baptism. God the Father, the creator of the Universe spoke in that moment and declared: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." In other words, "Jesus is carrying out my mission, I approve, listen to him."

Here's the heart of what I want to say this morning. The authority that underlies everything Jesus did and everything you and I are called to do and be in the world, is the authority of the One who created the world in the first place. The authority belongs to the one who owns and sustains and manages and loves and suffers for all that is and all peoples.

So, by what authority do you and I venture into the world? By the authority of God. God didn't do what he did because he wanted to start up another great religion, you know, to give us options so we wouldn't have to be Hindus. God is interested in his world. He's calling us to join him in that great work. We are in mission under the authority of the God whose love will one day gather all that he created and all the people he created and all the religions and nations into one glorious family. It's not our mission. It's God's mission.

Go back in your imagination to the book of Genesis. God created a beautiful, ordered world. Now one of the biggest ways that that world got messed up was in Egypt. We no sooner get to the second book of the Bible and we have this bloated, pretentious, confused civilization with a narcissistic head guy called the Pharaoh. The Pharaoh has everyone convinced that he is God. One of the deep messages of the Book of Exodus is that culture can set itself up in a manner that completely undoes God's work of Creation. So in the situation where you have this phony God and misdirected society you also have disruptions in nature with frogs and flies multiplying and getting out of hand. And you have people—God's people—enslaved.

Now, what happens in Egypt is that God—the real God who made everything in the first place—intervenes. He rescues the

Hebrew people and returns them to a nurturing natural order—which happens to be the desert. But that's okay. When God's in charge even the wilderness is supportive. Anyway, the Exodus story is the keynote story of the Bible. Exodus establishes in our minds the fact that God is deeply interested in the world he made and all the people he made. He deeply cares for fairness and who's in charge. Jesus' ministry, of course is the culmination of the story of God's mission in the Bible. But even Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are presented as a kind of Exodus deliverance.

So what's the point? The point is that God made and is renovating the world. God so loved the world that he gave his only son. Of course, God is interested in saving our souls and forgiving us our sins and making us his people. But he isn't doing this as an end in itself. He's doing this to create in you and me helpers for his great mission for the world. When you and I invite friends over for dinner and a conversation about what your faith means to you; when you and I go to Berta and read to a child; when you renounce claiming rights and turn the other cheek, what we're doing is contributing to the big project of what God is doing with his creation. That's our authority.

The recent movie, "Amazing Grace" has brought the 19th century evangelical Christian and member of the British Parliament, William Wilberforce, to our attention. After being converted to Christ, William Wilberforce began the gentle and bold business of calling for the abolition of chattel slavery in Britain. Many of his fellow members of Parliament challenged Wilberforce's authority and judgment in wanting to eliminate an important element in the economy, namely the free labor of African slaves. Wilberforce's authority to cry out for the abolition of slavery derived from God's project to see every human free. You see, William Wilberforce understood that God wanted to save the whole world, not just his soul. And because of that Wilberforce was engaged in many more projects in addition to abolition. These included Catholic emancipation, improved working conditions for chimney sweeps and textile workers, prison reform, restrictions on capital punishment, redistricting of political geography, the founding of the first society for the prevention of cruelty to animals, opposition to dueling especially on Sunday, the duty of the wealthy to give a portion to the poor. And by what authority did Wilberforce get so involved in the social order? It was all part of the mission of God.

You might be thinking, "Who am I that I should go and be a part of God's mission?" Moses asked the same thing. To Moses, God said, I'm going to go with you. Because, even then it was God's mission. The Prophet Isaiah said, "Woe is me, I am undone, I am a man of unclean lips from a people of unclean lips." Do you remember what happened with Isaiah? There was a seraph there in the Temple with Isaiah. It flew and took a hot coal out of the eternal fire and touched the lips of Isaiah and declared that his sin was taken away. Isaiah was made clean for the mission of God.

That's you and me. God has called you and me apart from the rest of the world to be a part of his redeeming mission to the whole world. As with Moses, he is ever with us. As with Isaiah, he has made us clean from sin through the redeeming fire of Jesus' cross and resurrection. And as with Jesus, you and I too are his beloved children called according to his purpose. That's the authority.