

"No Big Boss in the Sky" (29May16)
LuKe7:1-10; Galatians1:1-12

Who's the boss of you?

It's a question first raised by sibling rivalry, of my little sister protesting, "you're not the boss of me." But it also grows up out of childhood, as you almost certainly have felt the weight of being bossed around. Occasionally we may get to be the boss, but feel it much harder when we're the ones being bossed. Similarly, when you're remanded into the custody of the authorities, that's not a good thing.

This authoritarian pondering is prompted by the term "authority" in our readings, both in Paul's letter to the Galatian churches and in our Gospel reading. It appears right away in Galatians, that Paul is an apostle not sent from human authority.

It's more central and emphatic in the Gospel reading when the centurion contacts Jesus with a message, "I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers and slaves under me" who obey my orders. This man is a master of slaves and is a military commander in charge of 100 soldiers. He is accustomed to being obeyed. In fact, his words to Jesus on authority could almost be paraphrased in that boot camp cliché "If I tell you to jump, you say 'how high?'"

Even as we're remembering on this Memorial Day weekend those who have submitted to such strict military authorities and sacrificed themselves under an obligation to others, we're also confronted with the question of whether Jesus is that type the centurion commander seems to expect as he puts Jesus in his same own position. Further, would we also expect

that God is the big boss in the sky, Mr. High-and-Mighty, who's in charge of where we go and what we do?

Though it's a popular image, that's not the good news of God or the Jesus presented to us in the Bible. Again, God's authority is not as the one to boss you around, generally making you do what you don't want to do.

I did some sleuthing this week on the word "authority" to reveal for us where this term, this idea does and does not apply. In his Gospel, Luke uses the word 15 times, and a fair amount of those are not very complimentary. It is for the rulers and authorities opposed to Jesus. It's for King Herod's jurisdiction. Those who arrest Jesus on the night he was betrayed he called "authorities of darkness" (22:53). The worst example is when the devil tempts Jesus by offering to give him his authority over all the Kingdoms of the world.

(With that scary thought about Satan and Kingdoms, it's helpful and relevant to think of what Jesus discusses when he refers to his own Kingdom or the Kingdom of God. He doesn't say, "My Kingdom can beat up your kingdom" or even talk much about power and glory. Instead, his Kingdom is compared to a tiny mustard seed and the invisible work of yeast and a wide open picnic. It's like someone who has property and children stolen away, he says. And the Kingdom is for the poor and for children. None of that sounds very bossy, does it?)

On the other hand, Luke does say that Jesus has authority, and even that he has authority "over." His authority is in his teaching, in his word, and is the authority to forgive sins. He

has authority over demons and diseases. His power is to heal. (The centurion must not mean this aspect, since Jesus' authority over sickness is a different category, not equivalent with soldiers and slaves serving under their master.)

We'll come back to good news about the authority of Lord Jesus, but let's look now to Paul, in Galatians and elsewhere. I'm a fan of Paul. I believe he mostly gets our faith right in a way we've hardly captured since. That's usually a minority view. Often he's disliked as anti-woman, anti-gay, pro-hierarchy, pro-establishment, self-serving. I'd argue against all that, in part based in this look at authority.

First, we could note that the Greek word for authority doesn't even appear in our reading today. What it actually says in the original is, "Paul, an apostle not from humans or through humans but through Jesus and God the Father who raised him from the dead."

At any rate, there are other times where Paul does talk about human authority. One perhaps overused passage from Romans is that we should "obey the governing authorities." With Christians through history, we can discuss to what extent that's a faithful concept versus when we might be obligated to resist government or question authority.

But also we should hear a stunning reversal of any notion that God endorses authorities. 1st Corinthians says the end is after Jesus "has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power." (Destroyed authority!) "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (15:24-26).

That view of wiping out the authorities and

getting rid of them as the goal of God's Kingdom is in some essential way central to Paul's theology and also his ecclesiology, his view of the church and what we should be up to under the model of God and the Spirit's influence. Rather than a structure of authority, rather than bosses in charge, even rather than bishops and big wigs, Paul favors community. He's not for an authority. He's for the *koinonia*, the communal sharing, the give-and-take of this all, the mutual relationships. That, not isolated imperiousness, is what represents and proclaims God.

That's probably some of how we should be hearing this start of his letter to the Galatian churches when he says it comes from Jesus and not from humans. That isn't to claim a special spiritual vision that overrules any human perspective. In a way, it's just the reverse. He's saying that all of those human methods and manners are trying to rule over, are trying to be structures of new authorities, trying to keep you in place with guidelines to be obeyed. He's even saying that religious institutions from humans are trying to do something Jesus didn't show us and God doesn't want from us. When religion insists that some are holy and some aren't, that there are insiders and outsiders, that certain behavior qualifies you for definite rewards, that God loves some better than others, these pious-sounding authorities end up obscuring the good news and are—as the Bible and Luther used the term—anti-Christ.

This also gives insight to our Gospel reading. Against a perspective that the centurion commander and Jesus reciprocally recognize and compliment each other as fellow bosses, more

appropriate and logical is to notice the phrase “I am not worthy.” On the one hand, in spite of being a powerful boss—a muckety-muck who had done good things, who was praised by the locals for building the synagogue and well-established with community leaders—on the one hand, he doesn’t try to claim credit for that. He declares himself not worthy.

And on the other hand, Jesus is not blinded by this being a foreigner, or an unclean outsider, or even the occupying, oppressive enemy. Jesus does not claim those make the man unworthy, should not exclude him from blessing and community, do not cut him off from the work of God. That God’s work is not dependent on our self-evaluation or human standards of worth is exactly the heart of our faith, the faith Jesus is amazed at or admires in the centurion. You, too, may cling to and trust there is not anything you are and nothing you aren’t, of what you’ve done or failed to do that determines God’s presence with or work for you.

That brings us to one final piece to wrap up reflections on authority. I began by noticing the phrase “you’re not the boss of me” arises often among children. Well, one of my nephews tried it on his dad, who promptly replied, “actually, I am the boss because I’m the dad!” Thinking of parental care, this perspective from Jesus and through Paul reorients authorities for us, not to be authoritarian and bossy but to be in the role for guidance and compassion, a discipline that teaches and doesn’t just punish, a source of blessing striving to heal and to overcome death. This is why calling God Father or Mother fits much better than titles of Almighty or Ruler. And we should always remember when we call

Jesus “Lord” it is simultaneously redefining the term as embodied in one who serves and loves and laid down his life for the sake of others.

Similarly, then, besides the role of parents, there are many among this congregation who are bosses, or supervisors, or leaders in charge. And this faith shapes how we live into the roles. It isn’t about power over or acclaim or thinking yourself better than you ought. Instead, it is a role to serve, to do that Jesus work with his authority to forgive and teach, to overcome disease and evil, to struggle to the end against death. In this way, through your life and through Jesus, being handed over to the custody of the authorities finally may be good news!