

**Authority in Three Persons [Scott Kinder-Pyle]  
2 Corinthians 13:11—13; Matthew 28:16—20**

I wanted to talk with you today about AUTHORITY—and by authority I mean the influence we have over, under and beside one another as persons of faith, children of God and disciples of Jesus. But let's be honest. More often than not, depending upon your upbringing, we *rebel* against authority or we *undermine* authority. It's also important to point out that we often exercise authority reluctantly because we don't want to be perceived as heavy-handed. On the other hand, of course, the cases of an abuse of one's authority are legendary and legion. Authority figures like parents, priests, pastors, police officers, principals are often the voices in our heads, telling us what to do or shaming us for not doing it. And that's not to mention: presidents, doctors, judges, juries and Supreme Court justices... What gives them the right? What gives them the authority? Is it Matthew 28?

**“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you...”**

Well, isn't that interesting? A human being, who has been accused of multiple-crimes against the imperial government and against the religious leaders of the day—a frail Palestinian Jew whose been crucified for those alleged crimes—is amazingly alive enough to tell anyone who will listen that he has ALL AUTHORITY, and that it's been given to him. I find that at least interesting. And if you take it as simply *a matter-of-fact*, good for you. But despite the fact, it doesn't appear as if Jesus is in any position to boss people around, which is interesting, and my hope is that it makes us curious about the kind of authority he's talking about.

A few Labor Day's ago, I was sitting on a lawn chair at the edge of a dusty baseball diamond, sipping a glass of red wine. The yellow jackets had yet to launch their aerial assault on the corn-on-the-cob. Next to me were my spouse, two of our friends and a picnic basket, full of fried chicken, potato salad and freshly baked brownies. The ponderosa pines provided a decent amount of shade. A breeze blew gently. And about a stone's throw away, into left field, a stage had been erected where members of the *Spokane Symphony* began to assemble and tune their instruments. All was calm. Until it wasn't. Next to our blanket and chairs, the landscapers at *Manito Park* had positioned a boulder about the size of a Volkswagen—and suddenly it seemed to draw all the nine year old boys like a magnet. Each took turns climbing the boulder and then leaping from it with great abandon. At first I was impressed. Until I wasn't. One of the children, upon landing, wobbled and twisted an ankle, falling into my plate of food. I then took it upon myself to assert just a modest amount of adult-authority. With no parents running to take charge, I said to the next child in line, "Please don't jump anymore! People are getting hurt!" And you might think that would have settled things down. But no. No, it didn't.

Now, here's a question: *What if I would exercised my authority by saying, 'In Jesus' name, I'm telling you not to jump...' Or, 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, please stop ruining my Labor Day picnic...'* Do you think that might have worked? My guess is the next child might have shrugged and said, *'Don't tell me what to do. I'm an atheist.'* You see the dilemma? With the words of Jesus echoing in my ears—words like 'obey' and 'command'—we might assume there'd be no argument, no push-back, no sassy lip. But there is and perhaps there always will be. Until there isn't.

Jimmy Kimmel, the late-night comedian, routinely orchestrates this mildly cruel (although some would say harmless) prank. It's known as the *Halloween YouTube Challenge* and it's perpetuated by parents on their own children with a flat-out lie. It goes like this: on the day *after* trick-or-treating, the adults tell their children that they've eaten all of their candy, when they really haven't; and they record for public consumption the full range of responses, which usually includes lots of tears, stomping feet, screams, heads buried under blankets and toys being thrown across the room. And I admit, it's very entertaining. Still, as I pondered how this expression of parental authority would play out, there was one child who turned the tables:

Parent: You know how I put you to bed last night?

Child: Yeah.

Parent: Well, I got really hungry and ate all of your candy... I'm sorry.

Child: [coming physically close, face-to-face with the parent]: You're just joking. You didn't eat all my candy.

Parent: I did. I was really hungry.

Child: [backing away, looking hurt] But I wanted some.

Parent: I'm really sorry.

Child: [again coming close, almost touching]: Mommy, I'm not mad at you. It's okay.

Now, I don't want to be naive or unrealistic. But sometimes, it would seem, there's an authority that breaks through and we don't see it coming. And it's the authority of loving-kindness, forgiveness and forbearance. When the Apostle Paul, in today's first reading, concludes his letter to the church in Corinth, he writes, "***Listen to my appeal***"—and that *appeal* carries weight in that he's in a mutually-accountable relationship with them. And the commanding nature of that appeal comes to full flower when he declares in Second Corinthians 13:14 what I often say to you as a benediction: "***The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.***"

So let me just spell this dynamic out as starkly as I can. If a person whose died and been raised from the dead tells us to go and baptize and teach in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, he's obviously not operating like Steven Miller. Steven Miller, who is the Deputy Chief of Staff and Homeland Security, appeared on CNN and said, "We live in a world that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world that have existed since the beginning of time..." But are they? We believe the authority at the root of every authority existed even before the world began; and what existed before the world began is Love and the Dance of Love to the Music of a Loving Relationship. We don't usually talk explicitly about the Holy Trinity, but I'm going to make an effort by offering an analogy with a Bell-Ringer, a Bell and the Ringing of the Bell.

So bear with me: the Creator of the Cosmos is *the Bell Ringer*, but a bell ringer without a bell is ultimately just sad. In Christ Jesus, however, the Bell Ringer has his Bell; and in the life, death and resurrection *that Bell* is grasped firmly and with great anticipation, once and for all. And yet, if it weren't rung—if the Bell never resounded and reverberated throughout space and time, that would also be sad. And tragic. Therefore, in this analogy, the Holy Spirit constitutes *the Ringing of the Bell*; and the music that's made is the music that commands us. And it can still be heard. We can still hear it—even in the voice of a little boy who, despite his disappointment and feelings of betrayal, says, "Mommy, I'm not mad at you. It's okay."

Now that's authority! That's *all* the authority we're ever going to need—the authority that turns away from coercing the individual ego to conform and appeals instead to the relationship!

Before he died in 2024, Alexi Navalny wrote a memoir, entitled *Patriot*, in which he claimed to love his country despite the fact that his own government, under the dubious *authority* of Vladimir Putin, had conspired to poison him. In the book, he describes the cup of toxic tea he drank without knowing it, the horrific stomach cramps that followed, the coma, the transfer to a German hospital, where he received treatment and therapy—all before he returning home to Russia, where the *authorities* arrested him for violating his parole, transferred him to a penal colony in Siberia and put him on trial. And the question that lingers still is why. Why go back to the nation that had so abused its authority? And the answer, of course, is somewhere along the way, Alexi Navalny had been baptized “*in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*” and this is what he said:

“I often say that the problem with wanting to be Christ-like is when you look at what his life was actually like. The invitation to incarnate the Incarnation is no small thing. Most of the time the billions of incarnations of the Incarnation ... are somewhat ordinary, actually beautiful but not always noticeable. Sometimes an incarnation of the Incarnation catches the world’s attention.”

Now what’s so compelling about that quote is that it lifts up the small, seemingly inconsequential ways that we already obey the love and the justice and the forgiveness that Jesus has taught.

Already we obey a commandment to love the nations that do not necessarily have what’s best for us in mind. And already those in other nations are noticing and wondering: IS THERE SOME ‘OTHER’ AUTHORITY THAT SUPERSEDES AND TRANSCENDS—THAT RISES ABOVE AND CUTS THROUGH...? IS THERE SOME ‘OTHER’ AUTHORITY THAT COMMANDS US TO LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS COME HELL OR HIGH WATER? OR FIRE OR ICE?

“*And remember,*” Jesus says, “*I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”

On my street, growing up, the Wurzbach family had a bell. It was this really heavy, thick metal bell and when it rang, all the members of that family came from whatever backyard or alleyway to which they had scattered, playing ball or hopscotch. They came because they knew what the sound meant. It meant *'Dinner and desert'*... It meant that somebody somewhere understood their needs for nourishment and nurture about a common table. It meant *'Belonging and being there for one another.'*

“Don’t you feel like you’re being called home like some cow?” I had the nerve to ask one day. And the moment I said it, I felt this weird sort of loneliness because I knew how my parents would set me up with a T.V. tray and a salisbury steak that had been defrosting all afternoon; and I knew I’d seen all the re-runs of *Gilligan’s Island* and *Hogan’s Heroes* all before. “Don’t you feel as if you’re being corralled... commanded by that bell?”

And listening again to the resounding the bell, my friend just looked at me and said, ‘Wanna join us?’