

THE RIGHT USE OF AUTHORITY

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The First Church in Oberlin – United Church of Christ

Main and Lorain Streets, Oberlin OH 44074

The First Sunday after Pentecost – Trinity Sunday – June 11, 2017

Hebrew Scriptures – Genesis 1:24-2:4a

Psalm 8:1-2,3-5,9

Epistle Lesson – II Corinthians 13:5-10

Gospel Lesson – Matthew 28:16-20

Text: "...the authority which the Lord gave me for building up, not for tearing down."

**CALL TO WORSHIP** (*Liturgist is leader*) Psalm 8:1-2,3-5,9

Leader: O God, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

**People: You have set your glory above the heavens.**

Leader: When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, that you have established;

**People: What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?**

Leader: You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and with honor.

**People: You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put everything under their feet.**

Leader: O God, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

**SCRIPTURE** (*Liturgist*)

Lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures - Genesis 1:24-2:3

The first lesson will be just a portion of the very long passage that tells of the forming and ordering of the universe. Many strands of ancient traditions are woven into the fabric of this account, which is patterned into a sequence of seven days. I will begin with Genesis 1:24 - after the fifth day, when day and night, sky and water and land, earth and seas, plants and trees, sun and moon and stars, sea life and birds, have been accounted for.

(24) And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures, each of its kind: cattle and creeping things and wild beasts, each of its kind. And it was so. (25) And God made wild beasts, each of its kind, and cattle, each of its kind, and everything that creeps on the ground, each of its kind. And God saw how good it was. (26) And God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, and let them have authority over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all wild beasts and over all creeping things that creep on the earth."

(27) Humankind God created in God's own image,  
In that image, God created them,  
Male and female, God created them.

(28) God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and increase and replenish the earth and master it. And have authority over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (29) And God said, "Look, I am giving you every seed-bearing plant on the whole earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they will serve

you for food. (30) And to all the beasts of the earth, and to all the birds of the air, and to all that creeps on the ground – to all that has the breath of life – I give every kind of green plant for food.” And it was so. (31) And having made all this, God saw how very good it was. And there was evening, and there was morning, the sixth day.

(2:1) Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their array. (2) And by the seventh day, the work God had been doing was finished, and from this work, God rested. (3) God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because in it God rested from all the work of creation.

#### Epistle Lesson - II Corinthians 13:5-10

Our psalm reading for this Sunday - Psalm 8 – served as our Call to Worship, so I will continue with a reading from Second Corinthians, but a slightly different set of verses from what is printed in your bulletin. I will read from chapter 13 verses 5 through 10, in which Paul urges the members of the community of Christ’s followers in Corinth to mend their ways before his next visit.

(5) You must examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Don’t you perceive about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, of course, you fail to meet the test! (6) But I hope you will find out that I have not failed it. (7) Yet I pray to God that you will not do anything bad, not for the sake of my appearing to be successful, but so that you will do what is good – even though I may seem to have failed. (8) I am unable to do anything against the truth but only for the truth. (9) Indeed I rejoice when I am weak and you are strong. This is what I pray for, that you may be restored to wholeness again.

(10) I am writing these things while I am absent from you, so that when I am present again I will not have to deal harshly according to the authority which the Lord gave me for building up, not for tearing down.

#### Gospel Lesson – Matthew 26:16-20

Our reading from Matthew’s Gospel shows that in the early church a dynamic, inter-personal understanding of the divine in the formula “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” was beginning to develop into what we call “the doctrine of the Trinity”:

(16) Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. (17) When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted. (18) And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. (19) 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, (20) and teaching them everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

#### SERMON:

When David Hill told me after worship last Sunday that he had not been able to find anyone to preach for him today, I agreed to fill the pulpit, even though my week’s schedule was already full, including with Oberlin College Board of Trustee meetings the past three days. I understand all too well his predicament! So I looked in my dust-covered boxes of old sermons and found the last time I preached one on the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of II Corinthians was June 10, 1990.

The spring of 1990 in Oberlin was particularly memorable because of what occurred on the night of April 13. Hostility had been accumulating toward Oberlin College President Fred Starr, in part because he was perceived to be weakening Oberlin's traditional commitment to social justice so he could make the college over in the image of Princeton. That evening students began gathering on the lawn of the President's house to protest his unwillingness to meet with low income students to talk about inadequate financial aid. The protest turned violent. Six students were arrested by the Oberlin Police. Eventually President Starr was forced to resign.

I might add that the protest spilled another block down Forest Street to number 271, which was then the First Church parsonage, and woke up at midnight our oldest daughter, who was visiting, and her children – a four-year-old and a two-year-old. I, of course, a College trustee against whom the protest was directed, was not at home – I was at church writing my sermon!

Oberlin College at that time was experiencing an abuse of authority. When, a few weeks later, President Starr rose to speak at Commencement, many students turned their backs. As the students lined up to receive their diplomas, the President recited the traditional incantation, "By virtue of the authority vested in me I confer upon you the degree of Bachelor of Arts, with all the rights, honors and privileges thereunto appertaining." But as the students walked across the stage, many refused to shake the President's outstretched hand, signaling that in their eyes he was no longer worthy of the institutional authority that was vested in him. He had abused it.

The abuse of authority... or rather, the right use of authority – the right use of authority: that is my topic today. And my text is Paul's words in this letter to the community of Jesus' followers in Corinth: "the authority the Lord has given me to build up, not to tear down."

We are all too aware of some of the ways in which authority is being abused in our society today. Abuse in the political realm is obvious. Regardless of whether Donald Trump's words "I hope" were meant as mere desire or as real demand, his presidential authority does not extend to the power to require the head of the FBI to block an investigation of possible criminal activity.

Authority is abused when it obstructs justice. Authority is rightly used when it enhances justice. Authority is sometimes used as synonymous with power; but that is a mistake. It is when justice is stripped from authority that pure power alone remains. The stripping away of justice can happen in so many ways, from a disregard for common courtesy, as in announcing the firing of a highly-regarded public servant on TV or by a tweet before even contacting the official being fired, to a disregard of a government's fundamental obligations, as in ostentatiously refusing to recommit the United States to the collective defense of the NATO nations.

If what we are witnessing in our federal government today is the all-too-rapid loss of fairness, integrity and respect – the basic elements of justice – then what will remain is sheer power in place of legitimate authority.

Some of you here today were participants in a reading group at Kendal on "Fascism." Among the most widely books on that topic is the little volume *On Tyranny: 20 Lessons from the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* by Yale historian Timothy Snyder. Perhaps the greatest value of Snyder's tract is his warning that unless democracy is underpinned by the rule of law and the popular will, there is nothing to prevent "the arbitrary exercise of tyrannical power; the suppression of free speech; curtailment or abolition of civil liberties; laws passed by decree without public debate or popular approval; arrest and imprisonment without trial; torture and murder by unchecked agencies of the government; and theft, extortion and embezzlement by politicians in power, who inevitably turn into kleptocrats when democracy is destroyed." (Richard J. Evans review in *The Guardian*

3/8/2017) So, Snyder warns, “Do not obey in advance.” We all must resist, before it is too late, the destructive use – the abuse - of authority. We need to exercise our own authority as citizens.

So much from me for the moment on our contemporary political scene.

Let’s get back to the Bible! What do we find about the right use of authority? The creation story as told in the first chapter of the book of Genesis ascribes to humankind authority over other forms of life. Well, that’s not quite true. There is no Hebrew word for our abstract concept of authority, so if you were following in your pew Bible as Kim read the scripture you saw “have dominion” while she said, “have authority.” Other translators use “rule” or “rule over” or “have mastery over” or even “subject.” The new Inclusive Bible has “watch over.” Let me read again verse 28: “And God blessed [humankind] and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase and replenish the earth and master it. And have authority over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over the cattle and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

Oh, yes, if you were looking in your pew Bible you saw instead of “master [the earth]” the word “subdue” it. But the Inclusive Bible reads “be responsible for it.” It adds an intriguing footnote: “This passage, because of its traditional translation – ‘subdue the earth, and have dominion... over every living [thing]’ – has been used to excuse humankind’s penchant for trampling the earth and subjugating its creatures. Unfortunately the actual Hebrew is even more brutal... But this charge immediately follows the statement that we were created in God’s image – that is, to be like God – so surely the idea of stewardship and caretaking, not violation and destruction, is inherent in that calling.” Wouldn’t you agree?

If we understand the life form that has evolved as “homo sapiens sapiens” to be both intricately woven into the web of life and yet in very significant ways, especially cognitively, distinct from other life forms, then isn’t it fair to say that we humans have “authority” in relation to them – the authority to be constructive, not destructive? The basic message of Pope Francis’ encyclical “Laudato Si’ – On Care for Our Common Home” is that we have a shared authority, experts and ordinary people alike, as stewards of the earth. He writes, “I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all... All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.”

This regard for our responsibility within an interdependent community of nature is, fortunately, growing even in so-called “Red” America. A new book *Caring for Creation: The Evangelical’s Guide to Climate Change and a Healthy Environment*, co-authored by two life-long Republican, conservative Christians, is packed full of the statistics regarding global warming and climate change that we have all seen, demonstrating how human activity is contributing to our increasingly feverish earth. They quote the National Association of Evangelicals’ 2015 “Call to Action”: “We lament over the widespread abuse and destruction of the earth’s resources, including its bio-diversity. Probably the most serious and urgent challenge faced by the physical world now is the threat of climate change. This will disproportionately affect those in poorer countries, for it is there that climate extremes will be most severe and where there is little capability to adapt to them. World poverty and climate change need to be addressed together and with equal urgency.” (p. 109)

So there is hope that the dialogue Pope Francis is urging “which includes everyone” can even include Protestant Christians with very different theological views, as well as people like some of the children of one of the evangelical authors who, he says, “...See no relevance in the

church. They're not looking for heaven. They're looking for a better world... Secular humanism appears much more loving than the church to many [young people] today." (p.78)

We in First Church are striving to exercise in a right way authority that combines power with justice in caring stewardship. We are recognized by the United Church of Christ as a "Green Justice/ Creation Justice" congregation. We are dedicated – as our Vision Statement says – "to healing brokenness in our relationship with God, each other and the Earth."

Now that statement about "healing brokenness" provides a segue to this morning's passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We know that the city of Corinth was awash with religious cults and from Paul's correspondence we see that although he was the founder of the Christian community in Corinth, he was profoundly uncertain about the future of the movement there. Scholars continue trying to discern the precise conflicts that were disrupting the Corinthian congregation, but clearly both personal morality and communal harmony were disintegrating.

Paul writes an urgent appeal for members to examine themselves and see if the way they are living truly exemplifies Jesus. Paul wants this to happen, he writes, not so as to prove what a successful leader he is of the congregation he started – more successful than the late-comers to the city who are claiming to have better credentials and be more effective than he. No, it's not his own reputation that concerns Paul, but the health of the community and its members. And so he writes, "This is what I pray for, that you may be restored to wholeness again."

The challenge to the translator is that the word Kim turned into a whole phrase – "restored to wholeness again" - only appears once in the New Testament. But the word is used elsewhere to describe setting a broken bone so it will heal correctly. That's the link between Paul's prayer and our vision statement. We are dedicated "to healing brokenness in our relationship with God, each other and the Earth." Your pew Bible says Paul prayed "that you may become perfect." That could be the springboard for a sermon on "Oberlin perfectionism." But not today.

My sermon today is on the right use of authority. For Paul the Apostle, the right use of his authority was to build up the people in a congregation he loved and worried over so that they would exemplify Jesus in their lives. For us as inheritors of a tradition that views humans as imaging the creativity that ultimately orders a good and awesome universe, the right use of our authority is to care for our common home and earth's amazing diversity of life. For us as citizens, the right use of our authority is to insist that our governing authorities act with justice.

I could conclude my sermon on the right use of authority here and now. However, I began the sermon by talking about Oberlin College a quarter century ago, and Oberlin is in the news again right now – in a very good way, so just to answer a question many of you have been asking, "Yes, our newly selected 15<sup>th</sup> President, Carmen Twillie Ambar, is superb. She exudes a constructive, creative, caring spirit – in a word, the right use of authority. We could not have wanted a better leader for the institution that has such a significant role in this community and beyond."

But I really feel a need to conclude with a few words about another person, whose life we celebrated in a memorial service at Kendal yesterday, Mary Jean Rice. David Hill read just the right scriptures and then said this, "The scripture lessons we just heard, together reflect key elements of the life of faith for a Christian: an abiding sense of God's loving presence, a deep conviction for justice and kindness, a commitment to loving one's neighbors, humbleness before the majesty of God, all lived out in joyous response to a God who, before we ever comprehended the meaning of love, first loved us. Inspirational readings to be sure and yet readings that would challenge our daily comings and goings in ways most of us could spend a lifetime addressing

without ever mastering. In this acrimonious age, we need examples of lives lived in love and blessing of the neighbor. In a time of self-proclaimed, self-made billionaires we need exemplars of humbleness. We need the presence of those whose personal lives reflect the inherent interconnectedness of love, justice, gratitude and joy. In many ways Mary Jean allowed those who encountered her at least a glimpse of what such a life might look like.”

Jesus’ exercised his authority by sending his disciples out into the world to accomplish just such a life. May we all exercise as constructively the authority we have as Jesus’ followers.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer: Holy One, Source of all life and Sustainer of all that is good and true, we pray today for support in our own efforts to do the good and affirm the truth, as citizens of this great nation, as sojourners on this beautiful earth, as members of this historic congregation, and as participants in the networks of family, friends and multiple affiliations that give such rich meaning to our lives. When we suffer loss, comfort us; when we are broken in body, mind or spirit or in our relationships, set us right so we may heal again. Enable us to celebrate our diversity rather than let our differences divide us. Grant us the wisdom, patience and creativity to live constructive and caring lives, so we may prove to be faithful disciples of Jesus, who taught us to pray: Our Father...

Benediction: Paul wrote at the end of his letter to the church in Corinth, “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice, be made whole again, pay attention to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Amen.