

“Challenging Authority”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 7:11-24

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Now at the festival the Jewish leaders were watching for Jesus and asking, “Where is he?” Among the crowds there was widespread whispering about him. Some said, “He is a good man.” Others replied, “No, he deceives the people.” But no one would say anything publicly about him for fear of the leaders.

Not until halfway through the festival did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach. The Jewish authorities there were amazed and asked, “How did this man get such learning without having been taught?” Jesus answered, “My teaching is not my own. It comes from the one who sent me. Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own. Those who speak on their own do so to gain personal glory, but he who seeks the glory of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.

“Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?” “You are demon-possessed,” the crowd answered. “Who is trying to kill you?” Jesus said to them, “I did one thing, and you are all amazed. Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. Now if a boy can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing a whole person on the Sabbath? Do not judge by mere appearances, but instead judge with right judgement.

John 7.11-24. New International Version (alt)

Apparently we are in a “post-truth” world!¹ I’m not lying! Though in a “post-truth” world, would it matter?

“Post-truth” means that whether something is factually accurate or not, whether something really happened or didn’t, makes little difference. It’s human nature that when something makes us feel good, we tend to believe it. When something fits what we already think, we tend to believe it. That’s always been so. But these days, with just a few clicks or swipes, I am overwhelmed with information, ideas and opinions. There is no Walter Cronkite to tell me “that’s the way it is.”² There are thousands of them. Who do I believe?

“Post-truth” means we give up trying. People have always lied, but they were shamed when caught. Now, they just say it louder, blog and re-tweet it. Fake news goes viral. I can lie

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-truth_politics

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Cronkite

with a straight face, and you can all know it is a lie, and you will still go along with it if you want it to be true . . . that's "post-truth." Then we shrink into our own truth-teams with those who think the same as us, where together we mock and out-shout those on other truth-teams. It's like playing "There ain't no flies on us!" at camp, a game no one ever wins.

Who to believe? This very contemporary problem is at the heart of today's Scripture.

II

Jesus is embroiled in confrontations. Jesus confronts how the world works, how we think, what we believe, and the things we do. He wants to save us, to give us life, to renew us into the people God makes us to be. He loves us. So Jesus puts himself in our path, interrupts where we are going, points to himself and says "follow me."

He has arrived at the festival, not to gain fans and applause, but to confront. He is teaching. A crowd listens. Authorities move in. They want to destroy Jesus, but first they need to discredit him. "*How can he know anything?*" they say. "*Where has he learned?*"

A teacher (rabbi) would gather followers. Students observed and imitated their rabbi. They learned not only their rabbi's knowledge. They learned his whole way of life. This relationship could be like a father and son, so close were they.³ (And yes, we are talking about guys here; education was gender-segregated and unequal.)

Jesus' opponents challenge his teaching authority. He has learned from no rabbi. He has no credentials. So he has no authority.

What does Jesus say?

He says he has learned. He is not making this stuff up. He is not inventing or innovating. He has learned it all—all he does and says—from the One who sent him. His Teacher, his Rabbi, his Father is God.

III

That only inflames the confrontation. It's blasphemy. He sounds insane. They've seen Jesus do things that clearly violated God's ways.

"*Why do you want to kill me?*" Jesus asks. What's he talking about? His accusers know, and Jesus knows what they are thinking.

You see, the last time Jesus was in Jerusalem—it's in John 5—he healed a man. It was the Sabbath! That's the day each week God gives us for rest. God commands us to cease work for that day. Jesus worked. Jesus broke the commandment. At the time, he said he was working because God his Father was working. That enraged them more—comparing

³ André Lemaire, "Education (Israel)" in David Noel Freedman (ed), The Anchor Bible Dictionary (New York: Doubleday, 1992), II: 309ff.

himself with God!—and spawned their determination to destroy Jesus.

Now, Jesus says God is his teacher! Yet he violated the very Law God gave!

Jesus confronts them.

His accusers work on the Sabbath too, he points out. They are religious officials, and whenever they circumcise a boy on the Sabbath, they are working. The Law says that circumcision happens when the boy is eight days old. When the eighth day falls on the Sabbath, they do not delay the ceremony. When one part of the Law, circumcision, conflicts with another part, Sabbath, they make an exception. Circumcision is about the Covenant, the people of God, that vital relationship between Israel and the Lord. It takes priority.

But if they are willing to do that vital work on the Sabbath, focusing on one tiny part of the person . . . then what about what Jesus did? On the Sabbath, he made the man's whole body well! Jesus' healing is for the whole person. Shouldn't that take priority?

Notice what Jesus has done. They think they've cornered him. *"He has broken the Law, so he has no authority to teach it. Don't trust him!"* But Jesus shows how he follows the Law and its purpose—giving life to the People of God—more than they do. Trust him and his teaching. He has learned from his Teacher. He is the one Student of the Rabbi, the Son of the Father.

IV

So . . . do you think Jesus convinces them of his authority?

What convinces you? Or, what would? Do you want Jesus to be right? Or, not? In a post-truth world, that matters. What we want to be true matters, because that is probably where we will end up.

When something bad about some public figure I don't like pops onto my Facebook feed, I believe it. I have no clue, really. But I want it to be true! So, without any investigation or critical thought, I just believe it. I give it authority. That's post-truth.

Am I convinced about Jesus because what he teaches fits with what I think? Am I convinced because what he does fits with what I think he should do? Then notice what is happening. It is my authority I am following, not his. I set the standard, and measure him by it, accepting him only if he meets it. Then I am no different from his opponents. They set a standard, and measured Jesus by it. In both cases, either I am the authority or his opponents are. Jesus is not.

Jesus challenges our authority.

In the middle of this confrontation, Jesus says: *"Anyone who chooses to do the will of God*

will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.”

What is he saying? If we want to know the truth of Jesus, the authority of Jesus, then get our desire right. Jesus is confronting our motives, our reasons for seeking. What am I looking for? To have my own ideas vindicated? My own thoughts confirmed? My own attitudes applauded?

Instead, chase after what God wants. Seek what God desires. Pursue God's way. Throw up everything about you and have it drawn, like a tossed ball being pulled down by gravity, toward God. When Jesus stands in front of you, confronting the way you want to go, and says “No. My way. Let's go!” . . . will you be glad for the confrontation and pleased to follow?

Choose to do the will of God. Make God's will the light you search for in your gloom, the harbour you long for in the storm, the oasis in your desert. Choose God, and you will find the Truth of your heart's desire, the truth who is Jesus.