

Anybody remember when you were a little kid? And when an adult said something in particular, did you ever make yourself a promise: “When I grow up, I’m never going to say that…” I did. For me the forbidden phrase was “Because I say so…” I hated that! To me it was a total non-answer. “Do it because I say so.” Ecch.

Then I grew up and worked at a Church Camp on Cape Cod one summer. There was an elementary-school-age boy there. He was the most challenging child I have ever encountered. Ever. With him, it was a constant gratuitous flow of “why”? “C’mon, Josh, it’s time to put the crayons away and go to chapel.” “Why?” “Because everyone else is going.” “I don’t want to.” “Too bad. It’s time. Let’s go.” “But Why?” I could feel myself skirting around the edges of the forbidden zone. Finally, near the end of the week, I succumbed. “Why?” “Because I say so. And what I say, goes.” “Oh. Okay.” And we trotted off to chapel. Go figure. Who knows what’s going to work with kids?

This loathing for the “Because I say so” answer has caused me for many years to look at the nature of authority – what it is, where it comes from, and what we’re meant to do with it. I still try not to rely on “Because I said so” because I still don’t find it a generally satisfactory answer, but sometimes nothing else will do. At least with eight-year-olds.

In our first reading today, God promises to continue to be with us, God’s people, through prophets. He says, “Okay, I’m going to appoint folks to speak to you on my behalf, and I’m going to speak through them. They have authority only as long as they’re faithful to my task – when they stop saying what I tell them to say, it’s all over between us.” So there’s a first principle of authority – it isn’t ours, it’s God’s.

Then Jesus comes along and demonstrates God’s true authority. Real authority that comes from God has two characteristics. First of all, it’s strong. Strong enough to command obedience from unclean spirits, who are notoriously more challenging than any eight-year-old boy. The other characteristic of God’s authority is that it is used to lift up, to build up, to heal, to reconcile. Human authority often controls or oppresses. “My way or the Highway”, we say. But God’s authority is meant to elevate. “Be healed. Be whole. Be holy,” says God. And then God makes us so.

So then what is all this in Paul's letter about eating meat sacrificed to idols? Well, I do think it turns out to be another teaching on the right use of authority. Remember how Paul is always telling folks that they have been liberated from the Law? That they are under the law of liberty, and not the law of Judaism? In the first century church, the first Christians were Jews. Then as the gentiles heard the good news, people were telling them that they had to become good Jews in order to be good Christians. Well that made Paul crazy. "No, no, no, no," he would cry. "You don't need Jewish Law to stand between you and God any more than you need your old pagan gods any more. Now, you have a direct connection."

So it turns out that most of the meat sold in the market at Corinth was leftover from animals that had been sacrificed to other gods. Mithras. Jupiter. Zeus. Whoever. Whatever the priests of the temple didn't use for the burnt offering or for their own consumption was sold down at the local Market Basket. Or even worse, there was usually a restaurant attached to the temple itself for big family parties. "Let's all go over to Athena's Annex to celebrate Grand-dad's birthday," they'd say.

Now Paul and the people who were strong in their faith understood that meat sacrificed to idols was perfectly fine to eat. They no longer believed in idols, so fine. Food will not bring us close to God, neither will it keep us away from God. But the people new to the faith, seeing the elders of their parish with the big bibs around their necks eating prime rib down at Athena's might be scandalized enough to stumble or even fall away, not understanding liberty as much as trying to embrace a whole new way of being.

So Paul says this: "Look! You know and I know that it's okay to eat that meat. But knowing is not as important as lifting up the other members of our community. So here's the truth: In Christian communities, it's better to take compassionate care of each other than to be right or smart about something."

Wait, I reply. You mean that I have to give up being right or clever or smart in favor of being thoughtful and kind and encouraging? Oh, no. But the answer clearly is "yes." Getting it right is not as important as enjoying and loving each other.

Well foo on that! I *love* being right. The church is a great place for expertise and rightness. The right colors, the right seasons, the right liturgical forms, the correct doctrines and theology, the right readings for the right days. The church is just a wonderland of pitfalls for getting things right.

But think about the person who is new to the faith, who responds to God's call to serve by volunteering to read on Sunday morning. They're nervous, you bet. So what is more important? That they should pronounce all the words correctly with no stumbling? Or that the first time reader makes a tentative offering to God to which the entire community responds sincerely "Amen. Thank you! Yes. Good."

In Christian communities, it's better to take compassionate care of each other, to encourage each other, to lift each other up, than to be right or smart about something. Getting things right is not as important as enjoying and loving each other.

"Because I say so" is a human authority answer. "Because I say so" is not enough reason for anyone to do anything all by itself. On the other hand, God's in charge and God's authority is strong. It bears fruit in building up the people of God. It shows itself in communities that are places of healing or joy or consolation or peace. As soon as we can let go of getting things right, and grab onto making life good, we're well on our way. Peace.