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Pentecost 18

Friends, this morning's mission is to boldly go where no chief priest and elder from Christ's time has gone before: to answer that question Jesus poses about John's authority in baptizing others. And not just that, to answer the question: where, as Christians, do we find authority? How did John know that he was called to baptize people and how did those in the crowd that met him at the river Jordan know that his baptism meant something?

When we believe that God is calling us towards something, how do we trust that call is true?

To answer that question, we're gonna look to our Episcopal history. Put on with me your time travel caps and imagine you're in 16th century London. The Thames river is full of fish, people are hustling and bustling along cobblestone as kids play in the streets, don't mind the smell of everyone including yourself because everyone bathes about once a week. At this point where we pick up, Henry VIII had split from Catholic Church in Rome and had officially established himself as the head of the church of England, though where we're jumping out he's dead now.

But his shadow looms over the church. Now I suspect many of you may have heard the Episcopal Church finds its beginnings in Henry VIII, and that is somewhat accurate. But the intentions of splitting off from Rome so he could marry more wives isn't exactly the most auspicious beginning to a denomination, nor is it the beginning I think truly shaped our church and how our denomination understands itself; where we find authority.

For my money, our founder and the greatest Anglican hero was Queen Elizabeth I, who managed the country to and established a church that spoke to both Catholics and Protestants, a tradition we hold to this day. For someone so great as Elizabeth, who brokered a meaningful way between these two sides (and some of the true Episcopal nerds like me be internally yelling “via media, George!” but forgive me, that’s a topic for another sermon), for Elizabeth to succeed she relied on the best theological minds. One of whom, was a man named Richard Hooker. Now as we’re still sitting here with our time travel caps on, if there’s anything you take back with you from our trip, its these two names: Elizabeth and Richard Hooker. What Hooker gave us, its value cannot be understated. Hooker was in a heated fight with the Puritans of the time who believed that scripture gave absolute certainty that transcended, was more powerful, than any other kind, be it reasonable, experiential, or scientific. The Bible was number 1. And Hooker feared that by holding the bible to be such an exclusive authority, it could be used, through individual interpretations from the least to the most powerful, to act in the exact opposite way God would want.

As an aside, one of the great lessons I got from Divinity School was that the Bible is of course good and wonderful, but that it is one of the greatest weapons ever wielded by our species.

Hooker saw this danger. And articulated what others would refer to as a “three- legged stool” of authority. That our understanding of God and what God asks of us rests on this stool comprised of three legs. The first is of course scripture. Hooker did not disagree with the Puritans that the Bible was of supreme importance. But he didn’t think that God’s revelation ended there. As part of that stool stands the second leg, tradition, where God shows up as well. In addition to the scriptures we inherit, we inherit the interpretations and history of the past. We’re talking about that tradition right now, how God showed up for Elizabeth I and Richard Hooker. But I think it includes our traditions as well. There is infinite wisdom in the chili-cook-off, the Epiphany pageant, the stories of THIS place. God shows up here and has shown up here since this church was founded, just as God has shown up in your parents’ and

grandparents' and teachers' lives. Those stories help us along with scripture to hear God's call. But the final leg of that stool is perhaps, at least to me, the most powerful. And that is reason. The reason that is in each one of you, in me, and in the world. It is the force of reason alongside tradition and scripture which has helped people break free from the traditions that may have bound us; it is through reason fostered in loving relationship as uplifted in the Gospels which has seen that women can be ordained, that same sex relationships can embody the love of God, that as Jesus says today tax-collectors and sex workers will enter the kingdom of heaven before the learned authorities because they heeded Jesus and John's call to love.

If you haven't already, you can take your time travel cap off, and I hope that you find that tradition of the three legged stool, that lens of scripture, tradition, and reason, as encouraging as it is to me.

But you know what? If that's too heady; if that's not what you need to hear today. I hope the shorter version helps:

If what you do helps another person feel loved, chances are that God's on board. It doesn't matter if you are as strange and wild as John the Baptist, it doesn't matter if the circumstances in which you were born were as lowly as a manger or conversely if you have been privileged in this life. Jesus calls us to never rest, because the way of love isn't always clear cut. But it's the road we're always called to travel. Amen.