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St. Mary's, Goochland
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The 14th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 14)
Matthew 18:15-20

"Because I said so." When I was growing up, nothing made me crazier than when one of my parents used that as a reason why I had to do some things or couldn't do others. What kind of answer was that? I understood that they were far wiser and more experienced than I and that they had the authority to make the rules. I just wanted to be able to ask them about their decisions and for their application of their wisdom and experience to make sense.

The tendency to ask questions to make sense of the exercise of authority is a quality that has stuck with me to this day. It's one that I share with my husband Buck. A few years ago, we were delighted to find a bumper sticker that said "Question Authority." It's an old phrase from the days of Vietnam and Watergate protests, but neither of us is nearly so rebellious. To us, "question authority" simply means that the exercise of authority should be able to endure examination and questioning. That the rationale for the exercise of authority – even if you don't agree with it – should strengthen rather than weaken the authority. That anything is better than "because I said so."

Questioning authority is a great way to come to a deeper understanding of the Bible and who we are as people who believe in its authority. To question its authority does not mean that we're challenging the notions that the Bible is the Word of God or that we're people who believe it to be so. It does mean that we're asking, "If this is the Word of God, how does it make sense? If we are people who believe it's the Word of God, who are we called to be, and how do we do that?" Sometimes, the answers seem quite clear. Other times, they require prayer and discernment. There is rarely just one answer. Invariably, though, the questions lead to a deeper understanding of who we are as Christians and what that means for our lives today.

Engaging scripture is what puts meat on the bones of who we are as Christians. Asking who, what, when, why, how about the stories in the Bible and how they relate to us – and we to them – can be challenging, comforting, eye-opening, invigorating, perplexing...and throughout the coming year, we'll offer various ways to invite you to ask those questions: through Bible and book studies, through Sunday school curriculum and Adult Forums, through art and literature and movies, through current events and ways we can't now predict. In the process, we all have the opportunity to learn more about who we are – and who we're called to be – as Christians.

The St. Mary's staff does this every week at our regular Tuesday afternoon meetings. Before we catch up with what's going on in each other's lives, or go over what's happened in the previous week, or talk about what we have ahead of us, we spend some time with the gospel for the coming Sunday. First, someone reads it out loud, then we take a minute or so of silence before everyone has the chance to point out a word or phrase that stands out for them. Words and phrases like "listen" and "truly I tell you" and "where two or three are gathered in my name."

Then someone reads the gospel again. This time, after a period of silence, everyone has a chance to comment on what strikes them about the gospel, how they see it applying to their own lives or the world around us. They might ask questions, or comment on what's reassuring...or troubling. Rarely do we answer each other. We simply listen to one another and let each other's comments and questions sink in to our own engagement of the scripture. There's no right or wrong answer. It's simply one way of trying to make sense of Jesus's teachings and how they're applicable to our lives today.

Sometimes one or more of us are puzzled or even annoyed by what we've read. This past week, for example, that seemed to be true for many of us. Someone remarked that it sounded self-centered to worry so much about someone sinning *against you*. It occurred to others that Jesus sounded very legalistic, which is something that he always seemed to be criticizing the Pharisees for. It's almost like a recipe: first you do this with one person, then you add one or two more, then you add the whole church. And what's the deal with treating someone like a Gentile or tax collector? Wasn't Matthew himself a tax collector? Didn't Jesus hang out with Gentiles and tax collectors? What does that mean for those of us who are struggling to respect the dignity of every human being?

Not all the comments were negative. For some, there was comfort in the assurance that wherever two or three are gathered in Jesus's name, he is there among us. Overall, the idea is that by reading and listening to scripture together and hearing one another's comments, questions, and reflections, we open ourselves to a deeper understanding of the Word of God and who we're called to be as Christians.

And as we dig deeper into the meaning of Jesus's instructions to his disciples - as we question the authority of something that can sound so judgmental - one possible understanding is that Jesus was not pushing judgment, but reconciliation. That he was telling the disciples that it's their responsibility to engage directly with someone who has offended them. Rather than taking their complaint to a rabbi or a magistrate or a centurion and seeking some specified penalty, it's their responsibility to go directly to the person with whom they have a problem and seek reconciliation. The goal of each step is reconciliation - even treating the offending person as a Gentile or tax collector. Because

how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Over time, the same way he treats every one else...he healed them and ate dinner with them, and they became his followers.

And we 21st century Christians are their descendants. Which means we, too, are charged with seeking reconciliation rather than punishment. That doesn't exclude repentance and restitution, but it also doesn't mandate it. It asks each of us to engage directly with those who have offended us, to ask questions, to avoid assumptions, to seek a common solution, to build community by building relationships among ourselves. It's a variation on the "question authority" theme...reconciliation begins with each of us. Don't rely on the authorities to solve your problems.

It's another practice that we as a staff at St. Mary's have tried to embrace. We have an awesome staff, so thankfully, we don't have a lot of conflict. But our number one understanding is that the first step whenever issues arise between two people is that they are resolved directly between those two people. Ideally, the need for my involvement doesn't arise – unless I'm the issue! And triangulation is the biggest taboo. I hope that that approach becomes more and more the story of who all of us are as St. Mary's – as Christians together and in the world...asking questions and seeking reconciliation.