

Who Says?

1 Samuel 8:4-20; Mark 3:20-35

Sally had planned on preaching today and so her title was *Who Says?* She provided us with a lot of really important questions today, which I hope that we can all answer together. First question was *by whose authority do we live our life in community?* This is the question that both the passage from Samuel and the passage from Mark lead us to question. How much of what we do is based in the desire to do what everyone else is doing? Does the church give us authority, or have all-authority? Whom do you allow to author your life? Whose influence matters the most? All of these questions underlie how we express our faith. They underlie the role of the church, the role of God, in the expression of our lived faith. One might think that the answer to these questions is obvious: we live by God's authority as a faith community. God is the focal point of all that we believe and do. This is true of all five expressions of theological lived faith, whether it be evangelical, ecclesial, missional, ecumenical, or spiritual. When we come to worship each week, we participate in thanking God and praising God. When we worship, we also participate in the two sacraments of the United Church of Canada, that being baptism and communion. We participate and worship when we respond as stewards, when we find ways to give up our time, talent, and treasure. When we do all of this, we are living our expressed faith as ecclesials.

For ecclesials, the church is essential. The church is where we equip the body of Christ to live our God's mission and ministry in this world. For ecclesials, it is important for others to come and see how the Spirit is at work here in this place. Ecclesials are servants; they tend to the needs of the church, which include the people. Even the building itself is a servant, providing space for people to gather, to feast together, to help each other, to teach each other, and to provide the place of healing and hospitality. The strength of the ecclesial expressed faith is commitment. They are the Marthas of the world.

Now, what do I mean by this? You all remember the story of Martha and Mary and Jesus. Jesus comes, is going to have a dinner with them, and Mary goes and sits at the feet of Jesus, but Martha instead does the work – makes the meal, prepares everything, and then she gets a little upset. "Why isn't Mary helping me?" It's because Mary was an evangelical and Martha was an ecclesial. So Martha lived out her expressed faith by serving others. Mary, through hearing the good news and sharing it with others. And again, both are essential. For without ecclesials, the church wouldn't exist. But without evangelicals, the church might forget their purpose.

Many of you know that today is the anniversary of the United Church of Canada; the United Church of Canada is 96 years old today. And there will be a service later today that the moderator will be hosting at 5 pm our time that you can watch online. The United Church of Canada isn't that old, but we do have several statements of faith. Creeds is what we call them. Creeds explain what it is that we believe as a United church. In the most recent one, in 2006, which is called *A Song of Faith*, it's very poetic and likes to express who we are now today in this place. In it is a portion that talks about the role of the church, and it says:

“We sing of a church seeking to continue the story of Jesus by embodying Christ's presence in the world. We sing of God's Good News lived out, a church with purpose. Faith nurtured, hearts comforted, gifts shared for the good of all, resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize, fierce love in the face of violence, human dignity defended, members of the community held and inspired by God, corrected and comforted, instrument of the loving spirit of Christ, Creation's mending.”

It's *at church* that we come to know God. We learn from singing. We learn through Bible studies and discussions. We care for one another through visits and prayers and the sharing of communion. We learn about forgiveness and the grace and unconditional love that God offers. We create sanctuary for people as we sponsor refugees. We reach out to people who are in need, of food, sometimes shelter, sometimes a listening ear. Most often, people seeking acceptance. We help families grieve and we celebrate the love of all people through marriage; we visit people in hospital who are alone. Through the arts ministry, we bring beauty and joy to the world and we bring people together to have a common experience of Creation, inspiration as a way of addressing isolation in this world. Ecclesial expressions should be fairly familiar to all of us. This is how many of us have come to know God, and have come to understand what God is calling us to do and be.

But like the evangelical expression we explored last week, ecclesials also have a Shadow Side. Or, in other words, as Janet Gear who created this resource says, “when a good thing goes bad.” Ecclesials can become so committed to doing what they're doing, and how they are doing it, that they want to desperately ensure that the church will live on forever. However, when we get so committed to doing that, what can go wrong is when that the desire and the commitment of the ecclesials becomes consumeristic. When the ecclesials, like the people that Samuel was leading get called away from the authority that we should be falling under. In the passage from Samuel, we see the cries of the people longing for what they see that others have: they want a king. They suffer from FOMO, Fear Of Missing Out. They are clearly worried that if and when Samuel dies, they believe that Samuel's children will ruin everything. They fear the unknown and so instead, they see, or they perceive another nation that seems to be thriving and because of that, they want a king too, and thus the request comes to Samuel and Samuel goes to God and says, “What am I supposed to do?” And even after the conversation that Samuel has with God and God says to Samuel, “You need to go and tell them what it would be like to live under a king.” Even after Samuel paints a picture of what life would be like if they had a king, all that they would stand to lose, the people do not listen. In that moment, they choose to live by a different authority. They are influenced by others. In the passage of Mark, Jesus explores the difficulty we all have in discerning between what is good and what is evil. In

this passage, the scribes from Jerusalem believe that Jesus is in league with Satan. Jesus' family, his own family, thinks he has gone mad. The actions of his family, the projection of the scribes, lead Jesus to proclaim that we are easily captivated by the powers of evil, and his solution is then to even reject his own family. Puzzling, except that Jesus in that moment says, "You are all my family." And choose to follow and listen to God.

Now if we circle back to the United Church of Canada, in *A Song of Faith*, the church acknowledges the following:

"The church has not always lived up to its vision. It requires the Spirit to reorient it. Helping it to live by an emerging faith, rather than tradition, and challenging it to live by grace rather than entitlement, for we are called to be a blessing on earth."

Don Saliers, who is a musician and a theologian and a professor at Yale, writes the following about Mark's passage: he says, "Regrettably, our churches appear all too often to be divided houses. Subject to the powers of hostility and recrimination, and even enmity between theological groups. Communities so badly divided desperately need to find the deeper source of wholeness than our present debates allow."¹

Churches can become divided when we choose to listen to our own authority rather than by God's. God invites us to listen. Samuel *implores* people to listen. And Jesus witnesses, lives out his faith, through his life so that we will listen. So on this Sunday, when we celebrate the church, we need to find a way not to divide based on our own ideologies. We need to learn to appreciate the different gifts that every single person brings, to see each person in this space as essential to living out God's call. We also need to learn from what we have done in the past, to be aware of how powers of evil can easily lure us away from living by God's authority. Jesus calls us to be family. Jesus says, "we are his family." And Jesus calls us to weep when others are weeping. Jesus calls us to stand in solidarity with all humanity. We are called to not serve the church building, but to ensure that the building of the church is a servant of God. We need to weep and continue to work towards reconciliation with Indigenous people. We need to weep and continue to work towards equality for all people. With our siblings who are LGBTQ2S+. I can say in all honesty, that even though the church has failed and not always lived up to its calling, the church has made steps and changes that show that we are committed to the continued work of eliminating systemic injustice. The church seeks to diminish the powers of privilege and patriarchy. We want to eliminate racism. When we choose to let God be the authority of our lives, we can serve God and the world in a spirit of generosity, forgiveness, reconciliation and love. People whose expression of lived faith is ecclesial, need people whose lived faith is evangelical. Evangelicals need missionals, and so forth. The church needs to remember to whom it belongs. For we are called to be the church and to celebrate God's presence. Know that we are not alone. God is with us. So people whose lived expression is ecclesial, we look forward to the day when COVID leaves and we can live our expressed faith again. With one another, seeing this place alive and well, not only within the building, but in the community. May God remind us whose we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Don Saliers, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 120.