

A woman was trying to pull out of her parking space. She first bumped into the car behind her, then she scraped the car in front, and finally fully crashed into a truck. A policeman arrived and asked to see her driver's license. "Don't be silly," she said. "Who would ever give me a license?"

The last few weeks our gospel readings have been about the primacy of love. And from what Jesus teaches it seems like love is all you need to make the world go around. He is, of course, right. But it isn't so simple. There need to be authority structures and rules. Someone has to say, "This person cannot have a driver's license." Being loving doesn't automatically mean you can drive safely.

In our first Bible reading from Acts we see the disciples trying to establish an authority structure for the church. Jesus has ascended into heaven and given them the task of spreading the good news throughout the world. As long as Jesus was around he was a charismatic figure who created order. Now, without him, they needed to come up with something else.

It appears as though the original disciples of Jesus were the ones to begin this authority structure. This made perfect sense. They had, after all, followed Jesus from the beginning. They knew him first hand. They had all failed Jesus at the crucifixion and also had the experience of his forgiveness. New converts to Christianity would naturally respect these guys because of their experience. And so the disciples became the first leaders of the Church.

There was a problem, however. Jesus had chosen twelve of them. Judas had committed suicide and so they were down to eleven. The remaining disciples interpreted Judas' act of betrayal of Jesus through Psalm 109. It fits somewhat. And something that psalm does is suggest that the betrayer be replaced. So, they set out to find a replacement. Like we would do ourselves in such a situation we create "short list" of qualified people. But then they do something different. Instead of discussing the merits of each and coming to a consensus opinion, or instead of voting, they "cast lots" to determine who would be chosen.

Casting lots is the same as rolling dice - not the way we usually make decisions around here. How would it be if that's

how we decided elections for our political leaders or the school budget? Then again, maybe that would be better.

People of that era believed that rolling dice was a way to determine the will of God. They believed God would convey his intentions by the way the dice landed. I suppose it was the same idea as a Magic 8 Ball. Of course I wouldn't suggest making major life decisions based up what comes up in a magic 8 ball. And if you want to know the will of God through rolling dice, just head to a casino and you'll pretty quickly learn that the will of God is that if you are stupid enough to play games of chance you will most likely lose your money!

If we return to the original disciples of Jesus trying to keep a body of 12 of them as the core of the church's authority we pretty quickly see a problem. The whole idea only worked if Jesus was going to be coming again soon. Otherwise in time there'd be no one left alive who actually walked with Jesus in his public ministry. Indeed, the disciples believed that Jesus would return, and return very soon. The New Testament of the Bible is full of that expectation. But of course Jesus didn't return in their lifetimes. It is something that we are still awaiting. And so that initial church structure did not prove to be workable in the long term.

Something else happened to the leadership of the early church too. It appears as if when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in the year 70 they also destroyed the center of authority in the Christian church. No one knows exactly how many of Jesus' original followers perished in the year 70, but the Bible goes very silent about the church in Jerusalem from that date on.

The early church struggled hard to develop an authority structure that was both stable and still fully open to the wind of the Holy Spirit. There were several false starts. The Jerusalem church was one of them. For a time it appears as if the city of Antioch, a couple hundred miles north of Jerusalem was also one. Eventually Rome came to be the seat of authority. Of course Protestants and Eastern Orthodox Christians would disagree.

This is all enough to bring us to the question of what is authoritative in our lives? Of course the right answer is to say that the Bible is the "rule and norm" for your faith, but that would be a textbook answer, and you wouldn't necessarily live it in reality.

What is authoritative in your life? I assume it's a mix of (1) some core religious values, (2) wisdom from life experience, plus (3) some fears and uncertainties that want to be fed by getting approval from others.

Let me illustrate this third thing. A woman struggles with what to do with her son's travel soccer team. They have games on Sunday mornings when she thinks they should be in church. If she says her son can't do the league she'll feel like she's denying him opportunities. She doesn't want to do that. Plus, she doesn't want people to label her as a religious freak for picking church over soccer. After all, most people have no trouble skipping church. But if she says he can do the league then she's effectively telling him that soccer is more important than faith.

What will she do? Here's where her fears and uncertainties will win the day. She'll let him do the league telling herself it is only a temporary missing of church. God does forgive, after all. The soccer travel coach does not.

I don't mean this as a criticism. I just want to point out the authorities she's living by and how they affect her faith decisions.

Without creating any guilt let me conclude with a look at our gospel reading and the very interesting thing it has to say about all of this. We easily overlook the intention of the very first verse we read. Speaking to the Father Jesus said, "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word."

What does that mean the disciples are? A gift to Jesus. The words for the disciples go for us as well. We too are gifts to Jesus.

Now I don't know about you, but when I give someone something I don't usually don't give them junk. I give them something worthwhile. God didn't give Jesus junk. God gives something very worthwhile. God gives you. You are worthy enough to be a gift, and of course Jesus treats his gifts with compassion and care.

What does this mean for the authority in your life? Let your reality as a gift to Christ be your authority. What will you do to honor and grow yourself as a gift? Would you beat yourself up and consider yourself worthless if you are a gift to Christ? Would you act in a way unbecoming of a gift to Christ?

How would you treat other people knowing that they too are gifts to Christ?

Though it is a different way of saying 'love' it is a helpful image. You are a gift to Christ. Let that reality work its way into every aspect of your life. Amen