

Sermon for September 27, 2020 by Pastor Hanberry "By  
What Authority Do You Do What You Do and Believe What  
You Believe? Matthew 21:23-32 TUCC

In my first pastoral position as Pastor for Parish Life at  
another Trinity UCC—this one in Waynesboro, PA--after  
about 4 months in that position I had a 'Crisis in Authority.'  
You might wonder what sort of crisis I would experience  
about authority. Well, I was wondering as well.

In those days (decade of the 1990's) in the United  
Church of Christ in the State of Pennsylvania, clergy wore  
clerical collars. I knew one UCC pastor who wore his clerics  
while mowing his lawn; not sure if he ever took it off. I  
never did understand it, but if you were a UCC pastor North  
of the Mason-Dixon Line you wore a collar. In Maryland, I  
discovered five years later that was not as much the case as  
in PA and North.

In many circles of the Christian church a strong trend  
toward the wearing of a collar has expanded into the  
present time, especially for females in ministry. My  
tendency toward wearing the collar has changed over time;

I rarely wear one except when having a planned trip to visit a member in the hospital or to conduct a funeral or the like. And you know what? That's all about claiming the 'authority of the office' when at work in the public arena...a way of trying to "demand respect" where there is less and less of that sort of influence and respect. You can certainly have your own ideas about why that might be the case.

Back in Waynesboro, PA, after just four months in ordained Christian ministry and work in the local parish on a late afternoon walk on a cold wintry day, wandering about town, wondering what in the world I had gotten myself into, I realized that when I spoke, people listened, or at least they seemed to listen. When I walked in the room most eyes turned toward me. When I got stopped by a PA State trooper for having a "heavy foot" or just driving too fast, one look at the clerical collar and I would be told, "father, you gotta slow down...know you have important work to do, but drive safely; and no ticket...not even a warning." I must say that didn't happen too much but when it did, I was glad to get that sort of so-called "respect."

A little like the story in our gospel text in Matthew 21:23-32 this morning, <sup>23</sup> *When he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"* But NOT QUITE. Maybe in retrospect, what unnerved me the most in those early days of my ministry was that no one asked me to assert *"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"* I was supposed to know that and there wasn't much question about it. I still don't know why but I was unnerved by that sort of "assumed authority." Maybe, it was authority associated with the office and not so much with who I was in those days a person, as a pastor or teacher. Nevertheless, I had authority.

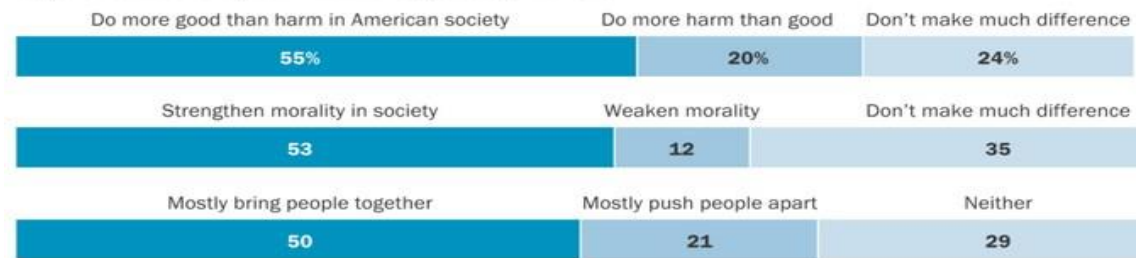
I was Unnerved by that authority I seem to have acquired in the process of putting on the clerical collar, granted to me by my ordination, I seemed to have---some authority I didn't know what to do with---some authority I didn't want because it seemed to carry too much

responsibility---and some auth I liked but knowing there was some ego and maybe arrogance involved, I didn't like that feeling either. Jesus never had those issues...or at least we don't imagine he did. He was human though.

Over the next 30 years (1990-2020) the authority given clergy and other community leaders has changed...from fairly high levels of respect and influence in community to life to less respect. Even though, the level of influence clergy experience as a group varies by denomination and locale, many folks, according to one of the major religious research groups in the US, The Pew Research Center, In the graphic below, the stats are not so pretty. Can you imagine, only 55 % of US adults see the church as "do more good than harm." Of course, participation in religious life in worship on any given Sunday is much lower than it was 30 years ago. I would like to have more of an impact than to "do no harm." I would like in whatever ways I can to do some good in the world.

## Many in U.S. see religion as force for good in society

% of U.S. adults who say churches and religious organizations ...



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted March 18-April 1, 2019, among U.S. adults.

"Americans Have Positive Views About Religion's Role in Society, but Want It Out of Politics"

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Maybe, as I think about it, the idea that 50% of US adults see religion as mostly bringing people together is pretty good, given the state of life in these days.

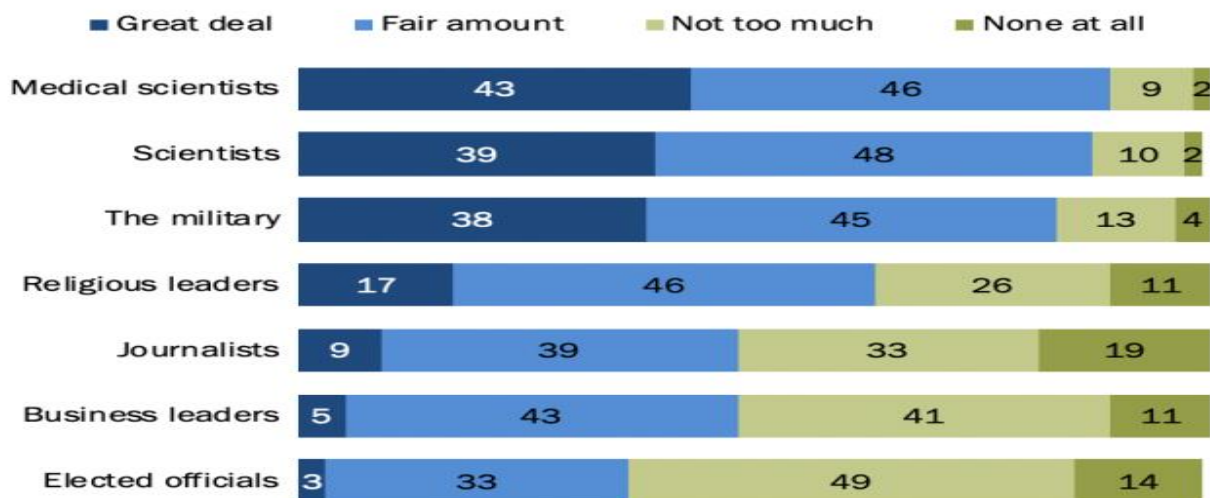
In 2020 in the midst of Covid 19 there is a great deal of concern about public trust for those who make policy and offer programs that might help stop the Coronavirus. Scientists' influence as well as their authority get questioned by the political establishment. The Per Research Center recently published a poll in the current issue of Christian Century Magazine—comparing American's trust in various professions. only 17 % have a great deal of trust in religious leaders. By what authority has this trust been eroded over the decades? It used to be much higher. In

some clergy settings, the clergy have created this mistrust in the way they act toward children, etc. In others people see more hypocrisy in the difference between the teachings of Jesus and the way the Church does its business...even its gospel business

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### **Americans' trust in medical scientists, scientists, military relatively high; fewer trust journalists, business leaders, elected officials**

*% of U.S. adults who say they have a \_\_\_\_\_ (of) confidence in each of the following groups to act in the best interests of the public*



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted April 20-26, 2020.

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In the discussion between Jesus and the religious leaders, knowing they are trying to trick Jesus, he challenges them with his own question: <sup>24</sup> Jesus said to them, "I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the

*answer, then I will also tell you by what authority I do these things.* <sup>25</sup> *Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"* After much discussion, the religious leaders couldn't or wouldn't answer Jesus' question. And as a result, he didn't tell them by what authority he did what he did and believed what he taught.

But then, ultimately, Jesus answers they question with a story about two sons and how they respond differently to their father's command of his sons to work in their vineyard. At the heart of this parable is the core value of honesty and integrity. One son says he will go work in the vineyard but doesn't. The other says, "no, I won't" but does do the work. So, which did the will of his father? The one who did the work. The proof is in the pudding, the pudding of living out our responsibilities in how we live.

Probably, the son who promised he would work but didn't, 'dishonors his father.'

Often, in Waynesboro, when I asked folks to do something in the church, do some chore, assist with the youth group or to teach a class I would have to sell them on

the 'opportunity of leadership' I was presenting. But when I did that they stepped up to the task. Giving to my "call" to their discipleship. That has changed over the years. Fewer and fewer folks say, "yes." They are more and more comfortable with not responding.

So I wonder for the church today, for each person reading or listening to this sermon, what motivates you to participate in the life of the church? What is that gets you involved? How much faith do you have in the work of the church? I have come to see my authority—the influence or impact I might have—on the quality and passion of my message and work. Moreover, I am honored to have the opportunity to each and preach and lead you to the place God is calling this church.

After all these years, I see my authority in the voice I offer to those who have no voice. I see my authority in the integrity between what I say and what I do. That's the basis on which you might believe me or not believe, much less say, "yes," to my invitation to ministry in the church. Amen.