

4 June 2023  
The Festival of the Holy Trinity

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Gospel Authority”

Text: Matthew 28:16-20; Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

***All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and . . .***

And *what?*

It would be an interesting exercise, I think, to give these words as what they call today a “writing prompt.” Gather a group of people who do not know these words as the beginning of what we now call *the Great Commission*, and see what they come up with. The answers, I think, would be instructive . . . to hear just how our world thinks today, and especially about *authority*. What if you had the authority to do anything . . . *what would you do?* If all authority in heaven and on earth had been given *to you?*

Perhaps Christians would say . . . If ***all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . .*** I’d make people believe. I’d put the Ten Commandments back up in courtrooms, and have people live by them again; behave again; stop the nonsense happening in our world. I’d put prayer back in school. Stop the persecution of Christian bakers, florists, teachers, and schools. And what else?

But what would *non*-Christians say? If ***all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . .*** Perhaps they would say: I’d let people live however they want. Stop the persecution of those living in non-traditional ways. Have people keep their ideas of morality to themselves; make sure everyone can live by their own truth.

Or (since we live right outside Washington, DC) if you had a more political bent . . . If ***all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me . . .*** I’d put an end to all wars. Correct injustices and corruption. Return our nation to its Christian roots. Stop the moral decay and insanity that’s taken hold in our culture. Or, further the progressive agenda. Or maybe you’d try to clean up “the swamp.” Or, make sure the president and the congress know that all authority in heaven and on earth has not been given to them!

And I’m sure you could come up with many other answers to that question.

*But what do all those answers have in common?* From Christians and non-Christians, from the political to the non-political? It’s this: they’re all about using authority to

impose something upon others. To make others do something or conform. It is the authority of the Law.

Which shouldn't be terribly surprising. The Law is our native language. Do this, don't do that. Which isn't necessarily bad - we need to teach our children right from wrong, we need boundaries in our homes and in our society in order to live together.

But this is not the authority of Jesus. This is not the authority that has been given to Him and which He then gives to His Church. Jesus' authority is not of the Law but of the Gospel. And so how *Jesus* completed that sentence was with using authority **to give**. To baptize and teach. To give forgiveness. To give the Word of God. To give Jesus. To give life. To give the kingdom of God.

**And to know that is to know God.** To know God rightly. That God is first and foremost **a giving God**. To think of authority in the way of the Law, then, is to think of *God* in terms of the Law, as the Law, that He is all about imposing upon us and forcing us to be and do what we do not want to be and do. That is making God in our image, and that will always be wrong and lead us in the wrong direction. But the Scriptures teach us to know God rightly. Differently than that. And from the very first pages.

We heard from those very first pages today in the creation account from Genesis. Those pages that teach us of creation, but also teach us of God Himself. That He is a giving God. Creation as God's gift to us. That a God who is love, loves, and so creates that which He will love to give His love. And what He loves is not just creation, but who He created all things for: **YOU**. You, created not like all the rest of creation, but different, special, in God's own image. You, given dominion over all creation, to love it and care for it as God does. You as the crown, the highest and most glorious part of God's creation.

For God did not create by accident or chance. As you heard those words again today, you heard that - how carefully, thoughtfully, precisely, and orderly everything was made. This, too, is who God is. And it is reflected in His creation.

Now, sin ruined all that, of course. And so in our world today, instead of careful there is careless. Instead of thoughtful there is so much thoughtlessness. Instead of precise there is "open to interpretation" and "everyone has their own truth." And instead of orderly there is what seems like randomness and chaos. And *with* that, it seems, a God who is a God we cannot count on. Who created, but not good. Who is unpredictable. Who needs us to improve upon and finish what He started.

But though our world is fallen and does not see God rightly anymore, that didn't change God or stop Him. Still He is who He is. Still He gives, and more and more. Our sin destroying, our sin getting us into predicaments, and God still rescuing, still giving, still gooding. To finally, the sending - the **giving** - of His Son in the flesh. That what God

started, **HE** - not we - would finish. On the cross. Taking all our sin, all our disorder, all our carelessness, thoughtlessness, and rebellion upon Himself to do away with it. And in its place, **give us** what is good again. Forgiveness, life, love, and salvation. Order, care, and truth. Rising from death, decay, and chaos to restore His creation, and most importantly and specially, to restore and raise **YOU**.

Jesus' authority is **to give**. To give His life. And maybe you remember when Jesus said this . . . when He was talking about Himself as the Good Shepherd, He also said, when talking about His life and what it means to be the Good Shepherd: *No one takes [My life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father* (John 10:18). Isn't that interesting and, honestly, somewhat strange sounding? We usually don't think of needing authority to lay down your life! But to lay down your life *without* the authority to do so *is sin*, just as much as it is to take someone else's life. But Jesus had the authority to do so. To give. To save you. To give forgiveness. To give life to all. To give His kingdom.

And once He did, once this work of His was completed, then He said what we are considering today: **All authority**, now, *in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and . . . make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*

This is what the Church now does. Give Jesus and all His gifts. Lay down our lives for others. **That is the authority that has been given to us.** Or in other words, and as you learned from the Catechism about this authority, it is *The Office of the Keys [that] is that special authority that Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent.*

This is a quite different kind of authority than how we naturally think and how the world thinks, is it not? Authority not to impose but to give. Not to lord it over others but to serve. Even the withholding of forgiveness is for this end: *to give!* To help people see their need for forgiveness and to desire it. We preach the Law, but not to make people good - it can't do that. We preach the Law *to give them Jesus.*

But do we? Do you? Use this authority? To give? Give Jesus? To forgive? Serve? Lay down your life for others? Or are we afraid to? Or are we too stubborn? Or are we just too *sinful*?

Well, you *were* too sinful, but not anymore. **Now** you are forgiven. You have been baptized. You have been *given* the Spirit of God, as we remembered in our celebration of Pentecost last week. You have been raised from the death of your sin by the one who rose from the dead Himself to give you a new life. A new life not only to live, but to give. By

the one who is *with you always, to the end of the age*. Who comes to you even now with His gifts, who comes to you now with His Body and Blood to feed you, that the gifts you give be first the gifts you have received from Him. Without Him, you could do nothing. You would be like those eleven disciples, gazing up into the sky at the ascending and disappearing Jesus, *some* doubting, *all* not know what to do next (Acts 1:10). But He is with you, and you have been authorized by Him to go and give. To do good. To mercy, to love, to forgive.

To know this God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons yet one God, the giving God, is the catholic, little “c”, or universal, faith, as we will confess in the Athanasian Creed in just a moment. The faith not just of Rome (who call themselves the big “c” Catholic church) - this is the faith of all who call themselves Christian - those redeemed by Christ, the incarnate Son of God, crucified. And by such faith, we receive His gifts - not just the physical gifts that all receive, but the spiritual gifts He gives His children, to those who know Him as Father. And those good gifts we receive, are the good gifts we now give. For that’s what sons and daughters of God do. And we cannot do otherwise. This is what we are authorized to do, given the authority to do. We have not been given the authority to sin, to withhold these gifts from others. To do that is not to be who we are. So when we do that, when we stumble, fall, and fail, we come back to be restored, resurrected again, raised to life again in the forgiveness of our sins. Practice, if you will, for that day when all the dead will be raised, and by grace through faith, we enter into that life that will never end.

This is the catholic, little “c”, or universal, faith. To know this is to know God rightly. To know this is to know yourself rightly. To know this is to have hope. To know this is to have life. So this is not just head knowledge, but life knowledge. To know what life is, who gives and sustains it, and how to live it.

***All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and . . . live!***  
Do not be afraid. Live in Christ as Christ lives in you. Live as the dear and precious child of God you are.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.