

The Moral Compass: Authority
I Corinthians 13 & Luke 20:20-26
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These last few weeks, I've been focusing on our Moral Compass – that essential tool in God's Global Positioning System that helps us find our way when the terrain keeps changing and our roadmaps fail us. Today I was to talk about the compass point that keeps us from harming others. But in light of the markets' bizarre activities, I've decided to change our focus to address our unstable situation. Next week we'll talk about harm ... but this week we'll leap ahead, to the topic of authority. Why? Because I think that part of the issue we're facing in this crazy time is, in fact, a crisis of authority. After our Scripture reading, let's explore why.

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“What makes people go wrong?” You may remember that I started our series on the Moral Compass with this question, posed by psychologist Philip Zimbardo. In his famous Stanford Prison Experiment, his subjects were good, smart kids, arbitrarily assigned as either guard or prisoner. Yet within one day – *one day* – the participants devolved into brutality and abuse, and within a week, the study had to be suspended. In the decades since this disturbing experiment, Zimbardo has dedicated himself to the study of how to strengthen moral good. Since we all *want* to be good, he examined the factors at work that make people go wrong. The conclusion reached by years of painstaking study can be summarized roughly this way: It is hard to be a “good apple” in a rotten barrel. Situational factors and systemic forces shape us more than we like to think. It's especially difficult to stay the course when the familiar road signs and scenery around us turn to unmarked paths through wild jungles. As Zimbardo puts it, “The old you might not work as expected when the ground rules change” (Philip Zimbardo, *The Lucifer Effect* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 6).

Well, if you haven't noticed, the ground rules are changing fast, and every week it seems to be getting crazier. For awhile it seemed that Paulson and Bernanke were leading the way out, and then the House voted their plan down. When the markets reacted with a 770 point drop, the House

reconsidered, and Congress passed the \$700 billion “bail out” bill that was supposed to open frozen lines of credit. But before the ink on the President’s signature was dry, the market reacted again, and by now the whole world was nervous. So the global banks did something they’ve never done before: in a unified move they dropped the lending rate a full ½%. And then the market reacted again. France’s index dropped nearly 8%; Germany’s over 8%, the UK’s almost 9%, Austria 10%; in one week, Tokyo plunged 24%, twice what they lost in the crash of 1987. Iceland’s banks are more frozen than their glaciers, Moscow and Jakarta suspended trading for who knows how long, and then there was Friday’s roller coaster ride here. The Wall Street Journal normally staid voice screamed this headline: “Wild Day Caps Worst Week Ever for Stocks” (E.S. Browning, Diya Gullapalli and Craig Karmin, *The Wall Street Journal*, Saturday/Sunday, October 11-12, 2008, Vol. CCLII No. 87, p. A1). One trader put it viscerally: “Fear has been running all over Wall Street. ...I think the carcass has been stripped to the bone” (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7662572.stm>).

What is going on? Many causes are certain: the housing bubble, over-leveraged firms, the bundling of good and sub-prime mortgages, and the seizing of the entire credit system. Many other causes have been posited: corporate greed and deception, lack of regulation and oversight, consumers living beyond their means, a country up to our eyeballs in debt. We all know these things. But today I want to add another factor to the equation: authority, or better said, a *crisis of authority*. To date, we have not trusted that the current President or either candidate has the power to change things ... we have not trusted that the Secretary of the Treasury or Congress has the power to change things, even with \$700 billion ... we have not trusted that central banks around the world have the power to change things, even with a major coordinated interest rate cut. On Friday I heard a major banker – maybe it was the German one, I can’t keep track anymore – say, “The *banks* don’t trust *each other*.” Nobody knows what’s going on anymore, which, I don’t need to tell you, is breathtakingly unnerving.

But there is good news for us today, and I hope you will find comfort and security in this.

The first piece of good news is this: we are not the first to experience a crisis in authority. In fact, in every period of globalization – every time humanity has experienced a quantum leap in the speed of communication and commerce – we’ve seen a massive shift in authority. The seats of power that commanded respect in one era often don’t meet the needs of the new reality. To paraphrase Zimbardo, “The old authority might not work as expected when the ground rules change.” But we need authority – it is one of the most basic social instincts of human nature. So, predictably, every time we experience a crisis of authority, *God provides us a new authority fit for our new age*. I think about the early Israelites: in Egypt, Moses was the right authority. But in the wilderness, he wasn’t enough, so at his father-in-law’s urging, he called fifty elders to assist him; and, God provided the Ten Commandments as the moral law for the people. Then in the Promised Land, while the Israelites were settling in, God provided judges to guide and rule them. And then, once they were settled, God provided them a king to rule the fledgling nation. In every time of major change in Israel’s life, God provided new authority fit for their new situation. And the same is true for us.

Take a step back to 1776 – not just the year of our nation’s birth which codified political freedom and the separation of church and state, but also the year Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* – which brilliantly codified our self-contained and self-sufficient economic system. These revolutionary ideas were only *possible* because of the massive changes in authority that preceded them. Think about it: in the *political sphere*, the ancient idea of theocracy – a divinely appointed king – had given way to the remarkable and radical idea of democracy – governors elected by the people. In the *religious sphere*, the Reformation had replaced the hierarchical authority of church tradition with the freedom of the individual believer to read and interpret Scripture. And in the *economic sphere*, for the first time, the top-down power of principalities was replaced by individuals engaging in competition and rationally determined contracts.

Now, change of this magnitude is rarely pretty: to get to a “new normal,” the western world had to endure the throes of the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, the American Revolution, the Industrial Revolution – until eventually a new order emerged, with authority *appropriate* for the new, democratic age. In the place of kings who ruled by divine right, we grew to trust officials whom we elected according to constitutions that we wrote. In the place of bishops who ruled by appointment, we Protestants grew to respect the clergy whom we educated, ordained, and called. In the place of aristocracy who were born into position, we grew to admire business leaders and the wealthy for their financial acumen and success. In other words, the authority once “bestowed” as a right was now *earned* -- by virtue of education, profession, elected position, monetary power: these emerged as the new authorities in the democratic age.

So this is the first piece of good news: as we find ourselves in another age of globalization’s rapid change, and the authorities that stood us well through the modern era are shaken, God will provide new forms of authority fit for our new situation. *The Wall Street Journal* acknowledged “it’s become obvious the international institutions that exist aren’t set up to coordinate responses to a markets crisis.” But it also noted that “a coordinated response is coming together, spurred on in particular by growing cooperation between the U.S. and Britain” (Gerald F. Seib, “Global Crisis Coordination Takes Shape – Slowly,” October 11-12, p. A2). The coordinated meetings of the G-7, the IMF and the World Bank this weekend will be working to begin to figure this out. It may not be pretty. It will not be quick. But a new authority will emerge.

The second piece of good news, indeed, better news, is this: massive change exposes the weaknesses in our human institutions ... and every human institution has its weak points, because it is *human*. To ascertain the source of weakness in our current system, let’s turn to our gospel lesson today. The Pharisees test Jesus, “Should we render taxes to the emperor or not?” And he answers them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and render to

God the things that are God's." Jesus is urging us to give the empire its due authority – even if it is corrupt and imperfect – because he recognizes our human need for social order. But Jesus is also telling us that no human authority is sufficient. Since God reigns over the entire sphere of the universe, God's authority will always be higher than any human authority. The emperor reigns over *his* kingdom, but God reigns over *every* kingdom.

Now, in Jesus' day, human authority was still hierarchical – emperor, religious ruler, aristocracy, top down. But when political, religious and economic authority shifted from the top down to the bottom up – from hierarchy to democracy – the *individual* became the ultimate authority. So now Jesus' admonition might be translated this way for our time: "Render to *oneself* the things that belong to the *self* ... but render to *God* the things that belong to *God*." Jesus is urging us to give ourselves our due authority – even though we are corrupt and imperfect – because we all need social order. But Jesus is also telling us that the law of God – the authority of God – is always higher than any human authority – including our own wishes and desires.

No human authority is the highest authority. We've seen the folly and limitations of human institutions before: the abuse of the Pope and Bishops' power was one of the prompts for the Reformation, and the abuse of the kings' power was one of the prompts for the advent of democracy. Now we're seeing the limitations of our current authority of individualism. Intriguingly, two centuries earlier, a few foresighted critics gave us clues of what was to come. In the sphere of religion, they warned of Protestantism splintering into myriad subsets, a "proliferation of what Matthew Arnold was to call 'hole-in-the-corner-churches'." In the spheres of economics and politics, critics like Carlyle were worried about what would happen when theocracy, with its principles, beliefs and values, was replaced by a new elite "concerned only with pursuing its own private interests" in "an anarchic battle for individual dominance." (*Introduction: The Crisis of Authority and the Critique of Political Economy* by Chris R. Vanden Bossche, University of Notre Dame; <http://usp.nus.edu.sg/victorian/authors/carlyle/vandenbossche/1.html>)

It is good news – a relief, in fact – to acknowledge the weaknesses of our human institutions. And it is the best news of all to recognize that there is an authority higher than we are: our God, who is still calling us to our better selves.

When everything around us is crazy, when it appears that anarchy reigns and no one is in charge, when every human authority seems to be insufficient, a finger in the dike of the tsunami, there is still a higher power at work in the world. God is still guiding us, if we will just stop to check our moral compass. It may not feel like much of a security, but you would be surprised at how very effective it is. You know the Stanford Prison Experiment? The one in which everyone caved into the chaos, and human decency flew out the window. The one in which the basest instincts overran these decent human beings? Well, there was one exception. Even though the ground rules were gone, even though he was traveling in completely unmarked territory, even though every external authority had collapsed, one young man *still kept the course of human decency*. How did he do it? He had internalized his moral compass ... his higher authority that guided him when every human authority failed.

With that let me close with a moral compass for us all to hang onto: a guide to God's authority for our lives, no matter what other authorities may fail. A reading – or better said, a paraphrase -- from I Corinthians 13.

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, if I can speak intelligently of derivatives and collateralized debt obligations, but I have not love, I am merely an articulate fool.

And if I have the prophetic powers to discern the financial market's roller coaster ride, and if I have all resources and the power to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

If I give away all my possessions and in the midst of the world's great need count myself a most generous philanthropist, handing over

everything I have so that I may boast, but I have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not give a pass to the wealthy or powerful to be irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in obfuscation but rejoices in the truth.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

As for the predictable patterns, they will come to an end. As for esoteric systems, they will cease. As for knowledge of what to do and what is going on, we should not be surprised that it has come to an end. For we know only in part, and we predict only in part. But when God brings things to completion, these passing things will come to an end. For now, we see as in a mirror, dimly. But one day we will see face to face. Now I know only in part. Then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. So democracy, and capitalism, and love will no doubt abide. But the greatest of these ... the greatest of these by far is love. Amen.