

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing, Clarence Presbyterian Church on  
October 1, 2023.**

**RECOGNIZED AUTHORITY**

*<Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 25:1-9; Matthew 21:23-32>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

If you've never before heard of George Muller, it's ok; up until recently, neither had I. And in truth, that's probably just the way he would want it. But in the mid-1800's, while living and working in Bristol, England, George realized a deep need in the community to care for the children orphaned from the cholera epidemic. Reportedly, for five months he prayed for the people and resources that would be needed to open such an orphanage, and in 1840 those prayers were realized as the orphanage was opened on Wilson Street.

But George's ministry didn't stop there. Within a few years, three more such homes were opened on Wilson Street, providing care for over 100 orphaned children. However, in 1846, after six years of such ministry, the neighbors on and around Wilson Street were complaining about the number of children and the drain on local utilities, and so George realized a new need: to move this ministry to a more rural piece of land on which a new home could be built. The main hurdle and impediment to address, however, was that such a move, such an expansion, would cost at least 10,000 British Pounds for the land alone. That would be about 1.5 million British Pounds today.

The story of George Muller and what would come to be known as The Ashley Down Homes, is a story that ultimately invites us to understand that to do the will of God is to *trust* the presence of God. And that, in turn, invites a very prescient question: On who or what do we place our trust?

It was the question Jesus posed to the chief priests and elders, when they came to him asking about authority. It's important to note the shift in location of our gospel readings; up until now, Jesus has been preaching to the disciples and crowds in the Galilean region. Now, though, Jesus has come to Jerusalem and to the temple. One of the first things he did upon his arrival, in the verses preceding our reading this morning, was to drive out the money-changers from the temple courtyard, which was, of course, a source of income to the chief priests.

And so they come to him asking on whose authority he did these things. In response, Jesus asked them, "From whom came the baptism of John?" It might seem as if Jesus' response has nothing to do with the question asked him, but in truth the two are intimately related. Jesus' question in response to the religious leaders is, on the surface, about what and whose authority they recognized. We see the evidence of this, even, in hearing them debate amongst themselves about their answer. Ultimately, they conclude

that their best, middle-of-the-line, non-committal answer is, "We don't know." But when we dig a bit deeper, we see that Jesus' question has to do with who they trust - who they trust to proclaim good news, who they trust to guide religious life and understanding, who they trust with some of the authority and power they have enjoyed. And in this light, their response to Jesus is even more telling, and perhaps even more troubling. "Who do you trust, and in whom do you place your trust?" "We don't know."

I am convinced that the religious leaders Jesus had come to a point of viewing themselves as the ultimate authority in all things related to the temple operations and religious life. And as such, their trust was in themselves. Jesus is asking them about whose authority they recognize, but the real question is, "On whom or what do you place your trust? Is it your selves and your own understanding, or is it God?" Because if it's your selves, then there will likely be no change or growth in faith; you may enjoy what you have always enjoyed, but it will come at a cost that is likely too high to bear. But if your trust is placed on God, then all things become possible, even if it's something that might not have been previously anticipated or imagined.

The question may be phrased on determining the authority of an act, but the intent is ultimately the challenge, the invitation, to again place their trust in God, first and foremost. The authority we give, or withhold, reflects the amount of trust we have; if we recognize the authority, we willingly place our trust in it.

On who or what do we place our trust?

The people of Israel continue to wander through the wilderness after their time in slavery and their deliverance. As we will see in the coming weeks, they also continue to struggle with placing their trust in God. Despite their deliverance from Egypt, despite their safe passage through the Red Sea, despite receiving manna and quail from the providence of God, we see again in today's reading how they struggle with this. Where they were hungry from our previous reading, today they are thirsty, and again they go to Moses demanding to have their need met. This is a practical question, but it again reflects a deeper, more indirect question of whether or not they trust Moses or God. Initially, they don't, but after God - through Moses - provides water from the rock, the lesson again is that God is One who can be trusted.

The people of Israel are being shown anew that God is a God whom they can trust, though that trust will need to be proven time and again. God, likewise, is inviting them to trust him, and in turn, to show that God's trust will be placed in God's people.

Now, these are not just questions we read about in our Scriptures this morning, addressed to different people long ago in different places. This is also the question to us, today: In whom do we place our trust?

Because we have a history of taking a step out in faith and placing our trust in God to see a new ministry or mission initiative realized. Even if we didn't know how the journey would look, we followed where God led, trusting in God to lead us to the needed result.

And because we are on the threshold of a new thing, too. This is exciting and encouraging, but it carries with it the potential for uncertainty and anxiety in the face of potential unknown. We may even come to a time when we are not certain of the outcome, but that uncertainty is not to be the determination of whether or not to be faithful and to trust. It occurs to me that I haven't yet finished the story of George Muller.

In 1846, looking to relocate the ministry of his orphanages to a more rural setting and needing 10,000 British Pounds, George did what he had always done: he turned to prayer. He prayed every day for a way to be made clear and the resources to be made evident. Not specifically for what he envisioned, but for what God envisioned. He placed his trust in God to deliver what was needed, even if George didn't know the full extent of what that would be. But here's the thing: *George never told anyone his prayers!* It was only in later decades that he shared in testimony of faith how he had gone about this process.

He didn't share with wealthy donors what he was praying for, asking them to be an answer. He didn't talk with builders or permit officials to try and sway opinion. He simply prayed, trusting God to do and provide what was necessary, but he did so without further proclamation. He just went about his ministry in the full trust that what was needed would be provided; in the meantime he continued to do what he was able to do - to care for and educate these orphans.

In 1849, the first of five homes was opened. Over the course of the following decades, more than 10,000 orphans received care and education through the ministry of these orphanages and George Muller.

George's capacity to minister to this degree was founded in his trust on God to lead and make known what would come to pass, and his authority to do what he did came from this trust. The people of Israel, eventually, would come to trust God to provide and lead, to be the authority in their lives. And Jesus challenged the religious leaders to again recognize the authority of God and place their trust in God to be provided for and guided forward. As we gather this morning, looking both at the week ahead and the coming ministries of our congregation, what authority will we recognize and where will we place our trust? I think we know the answer to that; so now, let us live it out. Amen.