

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Feb 22nd 2014

The 'chair' in the title of today's feast is not, of course, a piece of furniture. It is the kind of 'chair' embedded in our word 'chairman' or 'chairperson,' or simply 'the chair' as a title of the person in charge of a committee or department. The feast of the Chair of St. Peter celebrates the spiritual authority of the one who is called to exercise role of Peter in the church--first by Peter himself, and nowadays by the one we are getting to know as Pope Francis.

How authority in the Church is to be exercised was a matter of special concern in the teaching of Jesus. In response to the request for special status by the sons of Zebedee, Jesus says to all twelve apostles,

“You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

When Jesuits elect a new Father General, the first thing we do is hustle him into his office and read that passage to him.

The reading from the Gospel of Matthew illuminates the authority that Jesus gave to Simon bar Jonah by a reference to the “binding and loosing” exercised by a chief rabbi of a Jewish community. First comes the wonderful pun that Jesus makes when he gives Simon the nickname “Rock” and says, “And on this rock I will build my church.” That underscores the reality that the faith community of Jesus’ followers is not a human construction by something built by the risen Christ himself. The come that language about finding and loosing, which calls for some explanation. A rabbi was said to ‘bind’ when he interpreted how the Law is to be applied in the certain case. ‘Loosing’ referred to lifting the ban of excommunication. The awesome implication is that Simon Peter is here given an authority that counts as the exercise of divine authority in the earthy community of the church. To make sure that this power is used in the way of Jesus, the Gospel of John presents the same mandate of authority in the metaphor of sheep herding. In the final chapter of John’s gospel, we hear the powerful exchange: “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Feed my lambs.” And this exchange is repeated two more times.

That this lesson was well learned becomes clear when we read these words from today’s reading from the First Letter of Peter:

I exhort the presbyters among you,
as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ
and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed.
Tend the flock of God in your midst,
overseeing not by constraint but willingly,
as God would have it, . . . Do not lord it over those assigned to you,
but be examples to the flock.

Isn't it consoling the way that the popes of our lifetime — now, notably Pope Francis — have taken to heart this teaching about the exercise of authority in the Christian community? I don't think it is a stretch to say that we who also exercise authority in that faith community — as priests, deacons, pastoral assistants, parents, teachers, brothers, sisters, co-workers, pastors, committee chairs and parish council presidents — are called to exercise authority in the same spirit. The call is to guide and nurture and serve — and surely not to “lord it over” others.

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