

Impossible

Mark 1:21-28

Any group of people that exists or have ever existed have power dynamics. Reasons that they are given authority or not within any group. The church is no different than any place in the world. The only thing different here is that the one we follow, Jesus Christ, is consistently doing a new thing. This means that this new thing will challenge structures, and turn conventions on their head.

Clergy inhabit a strange situation within and without that structure. Some people give us authority by the very office of our calling into ministry. Yet, when we have come and gone the ancient structures of First Presbyterian Church will outlive us. Someone's grandmother donated that, someone's grandfather would be rolling over in their grave, someone's mother will have sat forever in that pew. As an interim I am only a temporary placeholder in the historical timeline of this church. You may like me, you may find me the height of arrogance, yet the reality is that I am temporary. The history of this congregation will outstrip my time among you.

Clergy see many things during their time among the faithful. Some of it is incredible acts of faith, others are disappointing human frailty and pettiness. At our best we rise above, at our worst clergy wade into the muck. We see patterns of systemic behavior we wish we could stop, or we wish churches could see the value that is inside their precious community.

All this leads to a story about patterns. Ghosts and apparitions that though dead, join us in our subconscious worship together. Rev. Criswell may be long dead, but there are still people who live deep resentments and react in their worship like that conflict was only yesterday.

So, the story. I wondered if I had told you this one before, but it is one that I think a lot of during my time here. My first church in South Louisiana was a place that deeply believed in the supernatural. Ghosts and apparitions were part of the cultural fabric of the Cajun and Creole ethos.

Every Wednesday we would meet in the Library of the church to have weekly Bible study. This was also the room where our session elders met as well. Like many church libraries it wasn't good, but was born out of good intentions. It was filled with crappy donated "Christian" books that were published sometime between the 1960's and 1970's .

The tables in the room were cheap folding tables, and the chairs were someone's donated discards from their office when their business got new furniture. The standard church donation.

It was the standard library and meeting room. Yet, whenever we met in that room, I felt a strange presence. What was weirder was that people began to nervously talk about Betty in

that room. The problem was that in that small congregation there was no Betty.

I searched the directory for every Betty I could find. There were no Bettys. As my time with that church increased more references to Betty occurred in that room, especially during our session meetings.

“If we do that Betty will kill us.”

“Make sure that all the dishes and silverware are counted after our potluck or Betty will be angry.”

“If we don’t have plastic flowers on the communion table each Sunday Betty will be soooooo unhappy.”

Finally, I gained the courage and asked, “Who is Betty?!”

They looked up at a framed picture set on the top of the main bookshelf. In its frame was an elderly woman in horned framed glasses who appeared from the picture to never have had a happy day in her life.

I stood up and took the picture down from the shelf and turned it around. Sprawled in uneven writing in pen which said, “Elder Betty Miller, Clerk of Session” and I immediately knew we needed an exorcism.

It turns out that Betty had been haunting some of those elders every time they set foot inside that church.

I found out that Betty was the matriarch of all matriarchs. She not only presided permanently as the Clerk of Session; Betty ran the kitchen. Now I knew why no one would let me sort and clean out the kitchen.

As a pastor it is always hard to determine when important oral history items occurred in the church. When people talk about the past in the church it is most often in language that makes me believe that this is recent history. More often it occurred years if not decades ago. I quickly found out the length of Betty's influence when I hauled two large trash bins into the kitchen to clean. I was told that I could do this act, but prepare to be haunted by Betty.

What seemed like 100's of packets of ketchup, mustard, and relish went into that bin. Any item in the pantries that was past its due date went into the bins. The broken dishes went into the bin. That is when I got to an entire shelf of Morton Salt. There must have been 30 containers of Salt. As I pulled out one round container another appeared on the shelf. It was like those small clown cars that are filled with an unbelievable amount of clowns falling out of the doors.

I noticed that the further I got to the back of the shelf the older the packages became. When I reached for the final container of Morton's salt I wondered at its vintage packaging. I turned it to

look at its back and found an offer for a silverware set that could be ordered for \$2.99 which expired in December of 1964.

Next session meeting during our devotions I related this story and said it was time for an exorcism. I walked over to the picture of Betty and took it down from its judgmental perch. I walked it down the hall to my secretary's office and placed it on the wall of the office.

I told the session that we no longer needed to make decisions based on the authority of Betty's ghost. I assured them that I would keep an eye on Betty and make sure she didn't misbehave. Then we prayed.

It is not impossible to participate in a church where equality and transparency are hallmarks. Yet, that might mean that we humbly exorcise the undue influence of those whose authority is carefully curated within the congregation of faith.

There is no doubt most churches I have served have needed exorcisms against authority which challenges the authority of Jesus Christ. It challenges Jesus with a presence cultivated in the family system of that church. Dead or alive they are an influence feared in that space.

Some people must decrease their authority so that Christ can increase. Whether it is the pastor, the person who fed up does the work others leave undone, their sexist understanding of power, taking down the blinders of opening up participation to

those who are not a part of generations of history, moving on from previous pastors, the “but they have always done this” needs to be at least questioned, “we tried that before and never again” must be forgotten, anger about misdeeds that happened in the past must be put down, nepotism needs to be ignored, and we must look at each person equally as Jesus Christ in this world.

Pastor’s need to do this as well. There is no inherent authority that I am given greater than anyone here when I was called to be a minister. I believe with all my heart that I am called out from the faithful, not ordained from some height above everyone else. We are of different callings of leadership and stewardship of talents. There is no one, I repeat no one whose authority is greater than the other except Jesus Christ.

If that is too hard to do, we need to get down on our knees and pray for humility.

We all have Betty’s that we are terrified to disagree, whether they are alive or dead. It is time for us to let Jesus exorcize and shake the foundations of our temporary systems of power. Jesus is all. Jesus is our ultimate authority. No temporal power gets to take the place of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.