

Testing

Testing is a concept very familiar to us...we grow up with it from the time we enter the school system and it continues for quite awhile. My current youngest grandchild Charlotte actually encountered it earlier in her life. Because she was born approximately a year and two weeks after her older brother Henry they have been very close all their lives. What Henry has done, Charlotte has seen and immediately incorporated into her life as being expected. When Henry began kindergarten at age 5, she expected to go and tried to get on the bus with him that first morning. It made no sense to her that he could go and she could not, after all she knew her ABC's, could count just as high as he could, etc. My daughter explained to her it was an age thing and her turn would come NEXT year as Henry was a year older than she was...forgetting temporarily about that two week difference and possible consequences. Of course Charlotte didn't forget what mom had said. As the year progressed, Charlotte paid close attention to Henry's kindergarten homework assignments and enjoyed doing them as well. She had definite plans for that fall bus ride. However, her birthday fell past the cut off date for entering kindergarten according to the state of North Carolina unless you passed certain tests. It did not matter that all of her pre-school teachers recommended her admission, that Heather could produce her work...Charlotte needed to score 99% on some standard tests and pass psychological evaluations. Charlotte took the tests three times...the first two times she scored 98% and 98.5%, respectively. This whole episode was over a calendar age difference of two weeks and only seven actual days related to the cutoff date. Already testing has had a marked influence on her life. Testing and test results govern many aspects of our lives...not just within the educational system although that may have the greatest long term impact as it often sets a ceiling on other aspects of life. The ability to get permits, licenses, and even some jobs can be associated with qualifying tests. Both of the passages of scripture read this morning are concerned with concepts of testing. In these instances, the testing is of YHWH by the Hebrew people and Jesus' authority by the Pharisees. We often think badly of this testing of the Lord as we read the texts. Most of us have an intuitive understanding of the type of test I first mentioned as an examination or way of assessing the knowledge, skill, aptitude or fitness, physical or otherwise of the one taking the test to fulfill the position or task being considered. So what role were the Israelites testing YHWH's suitability for as they make this journey? What bar have they set for acceptance? What qualification is this about? This passage is another narration about those people who have just had their earlier complaints on this same journey that they were going to die of hunger being answered by God with quail in the evening and manna in the morning; yet here they are complaining to Moses that they have no water to drink. God has already previously supplied them with water, but right now, they don't see any. Moses asks the people, "Why do you test the Lord?" Yet they continue to complain using almost the same words as before: "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" Moses, sounding a little impatient, asks God, "What shall I do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me." God sounds less impatient and simply gives Moses a way to provide water to the people...he gives Moses instruction and they are provided with water. The key to this passage, to what was being tested here lies in the final verse where Moses gives that place two names, names meaning quarreled and tested

because the people quarreled and tested the Lord saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" And that seems to be the basic issue: a lack of trust in the Lord's presence with them. In some ways this narrative seems a testing of Moses' leadership... What are the motives of this man who has led them into the wilderness? Why has he reappeared after fleeing Egypt and then led them here? More basically this narrative is a testing of the people's formation into the community living together and trusting in God's providence. These descendants of Abraham have been enslaved in Egypt for many years. They were not the community who knew God as Lord and therefore trusted in God's presence with them. Moses was raised in the Egyptian pharaoh's household, knowing little of his Abrahamic heritage. At his first encounter at the burning bush he asked God for his name. Moses seems to be well along this pathway of trust in YHWH, as when the people complain against him, he turns to the Lord for a solution. When Moses turns to God, YHWH responds to Moses, God's servant, giving him quite specific directions concerning the solving of the people's problems. Moses is "to go ahead of them, "taking 'some of the elders of the people' with him, and employing the staff that he had used to strike the Nile. He will strike the rock at Horeb with the staff, and water will gush from the rock. And so it does." The construction of this narrative presents what would actually be a modern day lawsuit: the people, the Israelites versus YHWH. The question to be decided is: "Is YHWH near us or not?" In the narrative, the question is answered in the affirmative. Step one is that the people cry out. That God was listening is shown by the provision of water by the striking of the rock by Moses with that staff. God was near, God heard and water was provided. The people bring this lawsuit to test the Lord because they do not trust in YHWH's presence with them. Sometimes, it seems we have the same problem. When we look around they do not see God's grace at work anywhere; then we like those folks ask, "Is YHWH near us or not?" The problem is that they also want someone to rise up with a rod to strike a rock and have the solution to their crisis provided. God does still hear our cries. But God has given us guidance and teachings, the light and presence of the Holy Spirit to abide with us to provide for our needs if we quit looking for a way other than living according to the ways of the kingdom as the solution. What is needed as a solution for most of the darkness of this world has been provided, but we have a tendency to want to provide other answers. We don't want to replace hate with love, our prejudices with acceptance. We want to go our own way and when the communities we have structured according to our ways are not healthy, we cry out. We have been given a path to follow, a way to live and interact with others. We want to indulge our selfish ways of interacting, ignoring how we should care for community and still expect no consequences of our failures. In the passage from Matthew, which comes from the later part of Jesus' ministry, the chief priest and elders come to him while he is in the temple teaching. They approach him with this question: "By what authority are you doing these things, and you gave you this authority?" The text does not explicitly say which things Jesus is doing they are wondering about as in the space of a few short passages Jesus has cleansed the temple of the money changers, healed the blind and the lame as children sang "Hosanna to the Son of David." in addition to teaching before leaving for the evening. These things angered them, so any of them could have been on their minds as they approached him in this passage the next day. Jesus returns their question with one of his own, saying he will answer theirs if they answer this one. His is: "Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?" This creates a debate among them because they are afraid to give an answer. They don't want to

legitimize John the Baptist, nor do they want to antagonize the crowd with whom John was popular...so they plead ignorance. They will not give an answer. Jesus then responds that since they will not answer his question, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." Jesus then tells a parable to the chief priests and elders about two sons; a parable which is very enlightening about authority and the response to authority. Because although the chief priest and elders who approached Jesus did not want to recognize the authority by which Jesus said and did all of his actions and teachings, as those who claim to be disciples...we say we know that he had the full authority to do and say it all in the name of the one who sent him, this parable seems to be for us as well. In this parable, the father has a vineyard. He approaches his first son and asks him to go and work in the vineyard, but he tells he father he will not. Later, he changes his mind and does go. The father then goes to the second son with the same request. This son agrees to go, but then did not. "Jesus then asks: 'Which of the two did the will of the father?' They said, 'The first.' Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.'" Jesus is answering their questions both about his authority and John the Baptist's. Both came bearing the message of the Lord calling the people to repent of the way they were living and to live according to the ways proclaimed as being those of God's reign, and the religious leaders did not listen and do the will of the father while others did. The theme underlying the texts today was testing...the Hebrew people's doubting and testing of God's presence with them which seems to echo among us today as we often question God's presence with us and in the world around us. When the chief priests and elders questioned Jesus' authority, Jesus raised the question about what constitutes recognition of authority. We say we recognize the authority of Jesus' voice in the teachings given to us in our scriptures, but as Jill Duffield pointed out in her commentary on the Matthew passage this week—when we look at the parable of the two sons that Jesus told to the chief priests and elders...which of those two sons do we resemble? Are we more like the son who says he will work in the vineyard but fails to show? Do we say we will do God's will, and then neglect the guidance we find when it requires us to change our habits or ways of thinking about others? This whole discussion on authority feels strange, uncomfortable even, to our contemporary ears—especially in our cultural context where so many talk so loudly of their individual liberty and radical autonomy. The answer to who has authority over me seems to be no one. It seems many wrestle with this idea of being obedient...even to God...and perhaps that leads us back to the question of do we really believe that God is with us or not? Do we trust in God's presence enough to be obedient to the teachings we proclaim? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.