

September 27, 26A (Matthew 21:23-32)

Remaining steadfast—offensive bodies and all

by [Kentina Washington-Leapheart](#) in the [September 9, 2020](#) issue

Where does one learn how to assert their pastoral authority?

I remember the very first time I heard this question asked, which was also the first time I seriously considered what the correct answer might be. It was the summer after my first year in seminary, and I was in the beginning days of an intensive clinical pastoral education chaplaincy internship. The topic of pastoral authority was raised in a group conversation with my fellow interns. We were all very eager but also very nervous about beginning rounds on our assigned units in a busy hospital in the suburbs of Atlanta.

None of us knew exactly what to expect, but what we knew for sure was that our role as chaplain would invite us into complex spaces with patients, loved ones, and hospital staff. Our presence and what we represented to people was sure to invite all sorts of responses—including sometimes no response at all—from those whom we encountered. What would it mean to acknowledge and assert pastoral authority in a hospital setting, in situations where chaos was swirling, tensions were high, and the chaplain's input and assessment were the last things on the medical team's list of priorities?

Jesus spent much of his life and ministry responding to those who questioned his pastoral authority. Without a template, any scholarly articles to read, or a small group of peers with which to process, Jesus continuously found himself in situations where people simply didn't believe he was who he said he was. No amount of miracles performed, stern yet loving correction given, or prophecies fulfilled was enough to change the minds of those who seemed committed to misunderstanding him. Yet Jesus persisted, even unto death.

Living into one's pastoral authority becomes further complicated when you factor in one's demographics. Asserting pastoral authority looks very different when your vestments clothe a body that is black or female or queer or disabled. Asserting

pastoral authority is not so simple when your titles act as neither barrier nor antidote to misogyny, ageism, or xenophobia. Being told to just “walk in the room like you are who you have been called to be” means little when those who you’re called upon to support are reeling from the trauma of harmful religious rhetoric and see you as the enemy—because you, by association, have been.

Asserting authority while living in a body others find offensive is grounds for interrogation, ridicule, and even violence. John the Baptist and Jesus are biblical, historical examples of what many contemporary pastoral leaders navigate regularly. As a woman minister, I know firsthand what it means to be on the receiving end of sexual harassment while in the course of my vocation. I know what it is to walk into a patient’s room and feel the air thick with tension because despite my badge that clearly identifies me as the chaplain, I am not who they were expecting. I know what it is to have my honorific surreptitiously dropped from my name, while my white and most often male counterparts are properly acknowledged. The list goes on and on for those of us who live in bodies deemed offensive.

In Jesus’ exchange with the chief priests and elders, their response to him is a glaring, *Who the heck do you think you are?* Uppity Jesus. Uppity women ministers. Uppity black ministers. Uppity queer ministers. Many have been killed, spiritually and sometimes literally, for having the audacity to exist. Nevertheless, Jesus persisted. And nevertheless, we persist, but it is not without cost.

I can imagine that Jesus was exhausted by the constant questioning and doubting, as are we who endure the same. What then is the solution, save a new heaven and new earth where phobias and isms cease to be?

I hesitate to offer any kind of catchall solution to a deeply embedded, systemic challenge. While you might be forced to respond to the question *Who do you think you are?* over and over again throughout your ministry career, you don’t ask yourself that question. When Jesus asks the priests whether John’s right to baptize was human or divine, they have no answer for him. So it is often with those who question the offensive bodies. When pushed to articulate the reasons for their investigations, for their bigotry, for their misogyny, their answers are often thin or even nonexistent.

Our answers don’t have to match theirs, however. Our ultimate response is to a higher, deeper calling, to the One who called us and who sends us. We can therefore remain steadfast in that, offensive bodies and all.