

Left to our own devices

Judges 21:25

“In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”
(New International Version)

These are the final words of the book of Judges. It is the ending of a story that is one of the lowest moments in the entire Bible. The story is gruesome, and at the heart of it is Israel’s inability to care for one of its own as they traveled through the land. The author makes statements like this several times as the book of Judges concludes. When I first read the book of Judges, I was new to the bible and 20 years old. I thought that “everyone doing what is right in their own eyes” might be a good thing.

I had grown up suspicious of institutions with authority. It is something that I have continued to struggle with. I am more likely to rely on my own judgments and edicts. But the book of Judges ends with a very loud statement that, when left to our own devices, we will seek our own good at potentially the exploitation of others.

I wonder why this is. Why do we long to be our own authority? We see lack of discipline in authority regularly in the news. From the minister who falls from grace to the CEO whose misgivings produce a heavy cost on many others. The unfortunate truth is that when I rely on my own authority I tend to make a mess of things.

I have concluded that authority without a trustworthy source is scary. The writer of the book sees a king as the solution to the lack of authority issue. However, it is clear from the next books in the bible that God saw himself as their king and did not want the people to have an earthly king. The people continued to ask and God gave them what they asked for, despite his reservations. God felt rejected and the kings exploited the people just like God said they would. I guess it is easier to have faith in what you can see rather than what is unseen. It is easy to put trust in the wrong places.

I have become grateful for those that have authority in my life despite inheriting a suspicion of authority from my cultural upbringing. Positive trustworthy authorities can be difficult to find. A good boss, a Milton poem, the book of Judges, the discernment of a friend, or traditions of a religious community can keep us from the temptation to do “what is right in our own eyes.”

JDB

Point of Prayer:

What sources of wisdom and inspiration have proven themselves to have authority in your life?