

“Who Is in Charge?”

January 31, 2021

Gospel:

Mark 1: 21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s People.

As long as I can remember my dealings with authority have not always been pleasant. I have been accused of not having any authority, pushing back on some rules, asking too many questions. And certainly, I have had my share of unhealthy authority figures. I expect we all have.

I once had a sticker slapped on my office file cabinet that read “Question Authority”. I left it up to the viewers to decide whose authority I was talking about.

The question of authority has been in the air long before COVID 19. The church has pushed their “authority” for centuries. That too often has resulted in excluding people instead of communion.

And these days we have been forced some days manipulated – to decide who is the authority. Who’s in charge? Where does the buck stop?

Is it the White House, Facebook, Twitter, the Bill of Rights, the insurgents at the Capitol? Dr. Fauci, your pastor, CDC, the Vatican? Who should we believe and ultimately follow? What does authority mean anyway?

I read this story about a new way to think about authority:

Once there was a wise old woman, a witch, who lived in a small village. The children of the village were puzzled by her – her wisdom, her gentleness, her strength, and her magic. One day several of the children decided to fool the old woman. They believed that no one could be as wise as everyone said she was, and they were determined to prove it. So, the children found a baby bird and one of the little boys cupped it in his hands and said to his playmates, “We’ll ask her whether the bird I have in my hand is dead or alive. If she says it’s dead, I’ll open my hands and let it fly away. If she says it’s alive, I’ll crush it in my hands, and she’ll see that it’s dead.” And the children went to the old witch and presented her with this puzzle. “Old woman,” the little boy asked, “This bird in my hand – is it dead or alive?”

The old woman became very still, studied the boy’s hands, and then looked carefully into his eyes. It’s in your hands,” she said. You have the authority to kill this bird or to let it live. It is your hands.

Hold on, before you decide this story is about your own personal authority and the power over someone else’s life – try this definition by the late Ethics professor and Episcopalian priest,

Dr. Carter Heyward reflects: “that genuinely creative authority, sacred at its root, is in our hands.

It moves us more fully into our body-selves-in-relation. It touches and often frightens us as it calls us forth to become more fully who we are already: that is – interdependent and mutual participants in this journey we call life.”

She suggests: The word “authority” comes from a Latin verb, which means to cause to grow, to expand that which already is. Deriving from that in English is author – means one who creates or brings into being.

Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles defines authority like this: “that which (or those whom) one has reason to trust.” The problem with authority is when we link it with our own power.

And Jesus offers a different kind of authority, a new teaching.

So, Jesus arrives in Capernaum on the Sabbath, he immediately goes to the synagogue and taught. And Mark reports: they were astonished at his

teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

So, what do you think it was about Jesus’ presence that people sensed his authority? How did they – recognize his authority and what was so compelling about it? What is this teaching that astonished Jesus’ hearers?

We don’t really know. Because there is not a word of Jesus’ teaching written in Capernaum in the gospel Mark.

But whatever it was, astonished everyone in the room.

But Jesus teaching is remembered in other places. Some Bibles, where everything Jesus said is printed in red.

It is curious that in Mark’s gospel, where Jesus is called “Teacher” over and over again by disciples, by the crowd, by Pharisees and Herodians – very few of Jesus’ teachings are remembered. Like the Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew.

All we know is how he taught: “as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

It was the Scribes who seem to have the authority. They claimed the authority of written words because it was passed down through generations. They had the authority of tradition – a kind of laying on of hands from the time of Moses.

They had the prestige of religious leadership, the authority of clerical position.

But Jesus – somehow taught with authority that was more compelling, more authentic.

Then we are interrupted by a mad man. Right in the middle of the service, perhaps in the middle of the sermon, we hear a wild voice, disruptive, disjointed, crazy. Where are the ushers? Who let this man in? “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” His shouting drowns out the preacher, “Have you come to destroy us?” – Us.

We look around. There is only one man shouting. Clearly, schizophrenic. Multiple-personality disorder. “I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

Imagine: the preacher comes down from the pulpit, departing from whatever text he had, and confronts the man, or rather the voice: “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, crying with a loud voice, came out of the man. Is that what we’re left with then? Evidence that Jesus’

authority was recognized by a crazy man? Can we trust the unclean spirits who acknowledged Jesus to be the Holy One of God?

What is Authority? Who's in charge? It is Jesus himself, who is the content of the teaching. At least that is what I believe. The authority is not in a speech, law or certainly control – but in this particular life. Jesus lived as one who had authority, an authority radically different from tradition.

Different from what is expected.

Here is the thing – to understand this authority, we don't just listen, but we have to look. Watch what he does:

Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners; Jesus heals on the Sabbath. Jesus moves by the feisty faith of the woman from Syria who dared to argue with him to heal her daughter.

What is this new teaching? Jesus' question – asking is authority, Jesus admitting the limits of his own authority.

At the end of his life, brought before the council of religious elders and the power of the state, Jesus' authority stands in silence.

Pilate asked him again, "Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you."

But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered. Even in silence, Jesus taught as one who had authority.

The problem is that the words authority and power, as in power over, have been intimately linked.

We even look for authorities to exert their power over us. We are led to believe that speaking or teaching with authority actually means exerting one's power over someone else.

I know many who believe that proving a point – and speaking or teaching with authority pretty much go hand in hand.

Carter Heyward suggests: The one with authority calls into something – into being – that is already there, and for that reason, can be trusted.

In other words, the reason we can trust the authority of the story or person, institution – is when it does not impose an extraneous set of expectations but rather evokes "something" we already know, or have, or are.

We need authority precisely for the purpose of helping us discover, recover, empower, and encourage ourselves and one another. That sounds different than the ongoing scramble over authority and power.

This authority ought to encourage us be who we are at our best. It is the opposite of authority as “force,” “coercion,” or “violence.” In the dominant culture, the imposed will and judgment by those with power-over has become synonymous with authority.

Force serves always to diminish. That is the purpose of violence. People who have to make us do something through rules, punishment, threats, or intimidation may exercise force in our lives, but they hold no real authority for us.

So, we must be suspicious of any kind of authority that is more about fear and bullying, and control. And at the same time, we must critique ourselves, our churches and even our politics, recognizing we are human with lots of limitations.

Jesus does not give us a systematic guidebook on authority. Instead, it’s how he lived his life:

Mark does say: “we have seen and heard about how his authority is made known in the world.” The people in Capernaum were amazed, so that they questioned among themselves: “What is this? A new teaching!”

The answer, I think, is to watch what does: Jesus insists on inclusion not exclusion. Precisely those who had been excluded before. Like the tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes, little children as models of the reign of God and immigrants as models of faith.

Jesus’ authority cannot be contained on a sticker, it cannot be reduced to a slogan or a tract or political jargon. Jesus’ authority is not a word to hurl at our opponents. Jesus is the content of his teaching. We must pay attention to his whole life and listen even to his silence.

I was recently introduced to theologian and poet, Gerhard Frost, who tries to open us up to the possibility of this different kind of authority in his poem “Loose-Leaf.”

When your options are either to revise your beliefs or to reject a person, look again. Any formula for living that is too cramped for the human situation – cries for rethinking.

Hardcover catechisms – are a contradiction to our loose-leaf lives.

Of course, we long for things to be clearer. And we feel threatened when there seem to be two or more possible right answers. We would rather check “true” or “false”.

But there is the promise – Jesus stands with us in the midst of our loose-leaf lives, promising to be present with us as we struggle for faithful answers in this time of human history.

If we are able to understand that our human understanding is not the same as God's, we might believe that the Spirit that dwelt with Jesus will lead us into truth which has yet to be revealed.

What is authority? Watch what he does.

Amen.