

February 1, 2009
The Federated Church of Hyannis
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ONE HAVING AUTHORITY

Mark 1:21-28

Bless now, O God, the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts, and when we go from this place help us to continue to hear and to see, and to do and be all that you would have us hear and see and do and be. We ask it in the name of the blessed one Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

It is one of the most important questions we have to answer: What is the ultimate authority in my life and faith? We could try to make our self our own authority, or some political figure, or some philosophy. We can make authority of our impulses or make our pleasure our ultimate authority. We can be flexible and choose whichever authority is convenient at the time, so our authority in critical decisions is nothing more than the whim or convenience of the moment. Or we can choose the word of God as the ultimate and constant authority in our life and faith.

We hear about someone being an authority on a particular subject or someone getting in trouble with the authorities or someone hitting a baseball with authority. There was a button that was popular in the sixties: "QUESTION AUTHORITY." Perhaps today we are more likely to see a button that says: "WHATEVER HAPPENED TO AUTHORITY?" Someone noted that the trouble with being an authority today is that you can't be sure whether people are following you or chasing you.

Sometimes authority is respected and sometimes it is not. A young second lieutenant discovered that he had no change when he was about to buy a soft drink from a vending machine. He flagged down a passing private and asked him, "Do you have change for a dollar?" The private said cheerfully, "I think so, let me take a look." The lieutenant drew himself up stiffly and said, "Soldier that is no way to address an officer. We'll start all over again. Do you have change for a dollar?" The private came to attention, saluted smartly, and said, "No, sir!"

There is the kind of authority that comes with an office such as that granted to a judge, a President, or a priest. But there is an authority that is innate, not granted from outside but one coming from within. The word “authority” comes from the same word as “author.” It is a word that indicates someone who creates. An author is not an author by office but by being the originator of words and ideas.

Great movements within the church are often centered around issues of authority. Out of our Reformation heritage there came the belief in *sola scriptura*, that authority in matters of faith comes solely from scripture. The authority in our faith rests neither in councils nor is it the product of human deduction. This rejects any human being as the ultimate authority of faith and places the authority in matters of faith in scripture alone.

Articles of faith drawn up by our religious ancestors in England in 1549 stated, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” Or as it is more simply stated by our Congregational ancestors, “Scripture is the ultimate rule of life and faith.”

It was from this belief that modern education sprung, since it became necessary for us to each be able to read scripture to discern the truth that God is speaking to us. The first teacher in some New England towns was the pastor, partly because he was usually then the most educated person in town, but primarily because of the importance of persons to be able to read the Bible for themselves to discover God’s authoritative word of truth. Otherwise we have to depend on a secondary authority, that is, someone else’s reading of scripture. We believe that each of us has the responsibility and the right to seek the truth directly from God’s word as our ultimate authority in life and faith.

But in each generation there are those who seek to negate the authority of scripture. Voltaire died in 1778. Before dying he said the Bible and Christian faith would not be believed in one hundred years. On the 100th anniversary of his statement, the Geneva Bible Society purchased Voltaire’s printing press and house, and started to print Bibles from there.

Two hundred and sixty years after Voltaire, the President of the United States declared the year 1983 as “The Year of the Bible.” Millions of people still look at the Bible as the reliable voice of authority. For two millenniums the words of politicians and scientists and religious leaders have often been wrong. The Bible stands alone in revealing the true way to God. It is the voice to which we are to listen as having ultimate authority.

However, churches have long had a second kind of struggle of authority, not for what God’s word says and means, but authority as in determining who is in charge, who gets their way on things. Churches often engage in long contentious and divisive arguments not over the truth of God’s word but over control of the church.

For a time in colonial New England there existed in the Congregational Church a position known as the “ruling elder.” Somehow the pastor and ruling elder were expected to coexist as co-authorities in the church. I imagine it would be like two brothers in the same fishing boat both trying at the same moment to control the rudder of the boat, or a wife and her mother-in-law in the same kitchen each preparing the same meatloaf with different recipes. The position of ruling elder did not last long probably for the same reason cars come with only one steering wheel.

A lot of life is taken up by struggles over who is in charge. Who decides what the family will eat today or who controls the TV remote of how the family money will be spent? Who decides what tests will be given in school or what sales quotas will be established or, as our nation faces wars and rumors of war, who will decide for our nation and the world? We can get lost in various struggles with authority and get sidetracked and set aside the ultimate authority in our life and faith.

Jesus’ authority was first seen in his teaching then confirmed in his healing. The ancient world understood the universe to be filled with both evil and benevolent spirits. They believed various kinds of human afflictions were a result of demon possession. Today we talk about similar behavior in categories describing mental illness.

Having a service that is disrupted by the mentally ill it is very unsettling. Years ago I was served a church on the near west side of Cleveland. It was in an area that mixed the working class and the permanently unemployed and some executives who bought the grand old homes and fixed them up so

they could have a short commute to work. There were also a lot of people there for the social services or the halfway houses or who just lived on the streets.

One Sunday about half way through my sermon, the back doors of the sanctuary flew open and a man wearing leather pants stomped down the center aisle. He stopped at the front pew, sat down, then turned around and gave a menacing stare at the congregation. I quickly reached for the last page of my sermon, read the conclusion, and announced the closing hymn. After the service, people gave him a lot of space especially as he walked toward me.

In a loud voice he asked me, "Are you a Christian?" I wasn't sure I wanted to answer, but I did. "Yes, I am." Then he said, "Then you should let me kill you!" I mumbled something about that being unnecessary and then he left. The next Sunday in the middle of my sermon someone came in the back door of the church and set the building on fire. Mostly what I and others did was to react with fear to a man who was obviously mentally ill and we paid the price.

Jesus has authority to overcome evil and to cast out fear. His authority is the ability to cast out not only what appears to be madness or "demons" or mental illness. His authority is over all that causes us fear, and his perfect love casts out fear.

Ironically in the Gospel of Mark the first person to recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God is the man with an "unclean spirit." It was at that moment that the crowd moved from being astonished to being amazed. What amazed the people was that Jesus taught them as one who had authority yet he held no office. He was not a member of the ruling Sanhedrin. He was not a judge or a priest. And, yet, he spoke as the source of the truth. And contrary to what we saw in the movie "The Exorcist" there was no long complicated ritual. Jesus just said to the demon, "Shut up and get out."

The authority of Jesus was not just that he did things with confidence but that incarnate within him was the very authority of God. For Jesus, authority was neither about getting control nor proving he was right on a certain issue or getting his way with the disciples. As we find in this story, for Jesus, authority was rooted in his intimate knowledge of the word of God and in a healing ministry to one possessed by evil.

Our source of authority in determining matters of faith comes from scripture. It is there we learn everything we know about Jesus. We learn from scripture as our source of authority. Jesus taught as having authority. The only authority we have is the authority we have from him. And so we should be less concerned about being an authority than about being guided by the authority of Jesus.

The scribes were a part of the religious establishment of the day and among the official interpreters of Scripture. They generally played the role of Jesus' antagonists. The authority of the scribes was derivative and Jesus' authority was personal. They spoke in the role of authority. Jesus had authority. They were given authority. Jesus embodied authority.

I am reminded of an old story about a gathering in which a noted actor was called upon to give an oration. He stood, cleared his throat, and recited the 23rd Psalm, with perfect dramatization and inflection. When he finished, the room was filled with admiring applause.

Then an elderly priest was invited forward and asked to recite the same words. When he finished, there was not a sound in the room, but nearly every eye was filled with tears. Someone asked the actor what the difference had been. "Well, you see," the actor said, "There's no doubt that I know the 23rd Psalm backwards and forwards. But the Padre here, well, he knows the Shepherd."

Jesus represents the full embodiment of divine authority. His is not an authority created to try to control others. His is not an authority that seeks to imprison and oppress humans. His is God's authority to liberate us from all that keeps us from the grace God intends for us. His authority does not rule by threat or brute force but by love and compassion.

When we seek authority on our own we flounder. When we give authority in our life to Jesus then we are found. Once a young man who wanted to change his life went into a church and sat down in the sanctuary. He took out a piece of paper and a pen and began writing down a long list of things that he promised he would do to change his life. He signed his name at the bottom and took it up and placed it on the altar, and sat down again in the sanctuary.

As he was sitting there, however, he began to sense the voice of God speaking softly in his own soul. The more he listened to it, the more he heard God saying to him, “You’ve done it all wrong. I want you to go back up there and get the piece of paper and tear it up. And then I’ll give you another instruction.”

So, the young man got out of his pew and walked up to the altar and did as the Lord told him. And then he went back to sit down in the pew and waited for the Lord to instruct him. Finally the Lord said to him, very gently, “Now take a blank piece of paper and sign your name to it at the bottom and let me fill in all the rest!” And that is when we make God the ultimate authority in our lives.

O Lord we pray that the unclean spirits within us may recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God. And pray, too, that Jesus Christ, who is perfect love, will cast out all fear from us, freeing us to do God’s will as we continue to strive to follow in the path of our Savior. Amen.