

February 1, 2015

TEXT: Mark 1:21-28

TITLE: The Gift of Authority

Twice in this short passage from the opening chapter of Mark's gospel it said Jesus taught with authority. That's an unusual word—*authority*—and to our modern ears, it is not necessarily a positive word. To a generation of aging hippies (you know who you are) who look at the world through cynical eyes, we still remember the buttons that said "Question Authority." Or to a younger generation used to Google searches, Wikipedia and Stephen Colbert's "truthiness," they routinely ask "Whose authority are you talking about?" Given this ambivalence about the word "authority," I cannot expect you to respond to this miracle story with the same enthusiasm as the people did in that synagogue long ago. At least, not until I get to... page 3.

There are several ways to think about authority. The most common way is to think of authority in terms of the power one person has over another. Here's an example. In 1775, just after Paul Revere's historic ride, the fledgling Continental Army decided they needed to capture Fort Ticonderoga to prevent a British attack from the north. So Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys of Vermont headed toward Lake Champlain and reached the fort early on the morning of May 10. They walked in the open front gate, overcame a lone sentry and found everyone there asleep. According to Allen's memoirs, when he burst into the barracks, a confused British captain asked, "By whose authority do you act?" To which Allen supposedly replied, "In the name of the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress." Now, I'm grateful that Allen gave God top billing, but in truth, at that moment, most of his authority came from the fact that he was pointing a loaded rifle at a man in his pajamas.

Our world has long been accustomed to authority delivered while looking down the barrel of a gun, or from a torpedo shot from a submarine, or when demands are made while a general has his finger over a button able to launch a nuclear weapon. "Might makes right" is the guiding principle for coercive authority, whether supposedly done in the name of Jehovah or Allah or Buddha. But that was not the type of authority revealed in the Capernaum synagogue by Jesus; it is wise to always remember that fact.

One clue to Jesus' distinctive role comes from the remark that he taught as "one having authority and not as the scribes." In Jesus' day, there was only one temple—the temple of Jerusalem—but there were lots of synagogues. These were the places where Jews gathered to pray, to hear readings from the Law and Prophets, and to discuss what the scripture meant in their daily life. To guide all this were the scribes, wise men who had studied how other famous teachers interpreted the Law of Moses. They knew what Rabbi So-and-So had said about every passage in Deuteronomy or how to understand the words from Ezekiel. In

effect, the scribes' authority was derivative; they stood on the shoulders of those who had gone before them. Their wisdom came from citing others' teachings.

Now it's important to realize that our passage from Mark isn't bashing the scribes. Anti-Semitism has no place in the Christian church. And in truth, I am also a scribe. My authority comes from external things. I have a microphone and a nice robe. I also have a commitment to share reflections on scripture grounded in what others have said and taught before me. I am just as derivative an authority as the scribes in the Capernaum synagogue. This also means—and this should come as no surprise to any of you—I am not Jesus. If Jesus walked into this church, or honestly into any American church, and began to speak, people would assuredly say the same thing as the crowds did long ago: "What is this? A new teaching—with authority." Not a coercive authority—not a derivative authority—but a true authority that brings forth life, healing, even joy.

Here's another story, not from the Revolutionary War but from World War II. In the weeks following the horrible events of Pearl Harbor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt knew he needed to deliver one of his famous fireside chats. He needed to communicate as clearly as possible how dire the situation was in the war against the Axis powers. Roosevelt told his speechwriters that he was going to speak about geography—about strange places many people had never heard of—places that are now the battleground for civilization so they will understand what is going on and what the strategy of the war will be. To do this, he would ask Americans to have a map of the world before them when he spoke. So Americans by the thousands raced to their local stores to buy maps. One store manager brought 2000 copies of an atlas from his warehouse and by nightfall they were all sold. When FDR gave his talk on February 23, nearly 80% of the U.S. adult audience, many with maps spread before them, listened to his words about how America was facing a new kind of war, one waged on every continent, every island, every sea, every air-lane in the world – and the broad oceans around North America could no longer serve as protection from foreign attacks. His quiet, authoritative voice heard through millions of radios helped this nation fully grasp what was at stake in World War II.¹

There is a top-down type of authority that too often is enforced with a rifle or sword or military threats. There is a derivative type of authority that calls upon us to simply trust tradition and the wisdom of those who have gone before us. But true authority is something that communicates honestly and directly, speaking from the heart in ways that touch others' hearts. What FDR did in outlining the geography of a new world war, Jesus did by outlining the geography of God's kingdom as it breaks into this world. Jesus spoke and made it clear that all things demonic have no place here. His authoritative voice proved that voices promoting anger, violence, disease, and prejudice have no ultimate authority. They are rebuked - silenced by the one whose teaching and authority are more real than any that have come before him.

Jesus' authority is not "top down" but foundational, coming from the bottom up. His authority is not idiosyncratic—applicable only to a few people in a particular situation; it is global and all-inclusive—appropriate wherever we are and whomever we are with. And here's the genius of his authority. It doesn't come through a loaded rifle, or a microphone and clerical robe, or even through the comforting sound of a million radios tuned to hear one fireside chat. Jesus' authority comes as a gift—freely given, unearned, lovingly handed over. It is the gift of true authority handed over when we hear, "*Blessed are the poor, the meek, the peacemakers for they shall inherit the earth*" and we know in our hearts that the one offering that blessing can truly heal our troubled, possessed spirits. It is gift when we hear, "*What you have done for the least of these, you have done for me*" and we know in our hearts that we need no higher incentive than that to do what is right for others.

Mostly it is there when we stand—hungry, confused, badgered by demons, anxious, doubting, and we hear the promise, "*This is my body given for you.*" Freely given—not compelled. Freely given—taking an old tradition and making it new. An authority given by God to us so that justice may reign and violence be silenced; so that light may shine and cast out all earthly darkness; so that this world's authority may yield at last to God's holy, loving, steadfast authority.

Think for a moment: What has authority in your life? Or more accurately, to whom have you given authority? Is that person or power worthy of you? Remember this: When gifts are offered, they still need to be accepted. So in the famous words of Paul Tillich, today accept that you are accepted. For a new teaching—a different authority—has been given to you—lovingly given for you and for the healing of all humankind. Accept this gift – trust the authority of God unconditionally. Or to paraphrase the words spoken by Christ at the Last —Take. Receive this. And always remember me.

AMEN

¹ Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time, 1994, pp. 319-320.