

## On Whose Authority?

Our readings this morning address a topic that can make Episcopalians squirm in their pews: authority. Jesus, having arrived in Capernaum with his disciples, walks into the local synagogue on the sabbath and starts teaching. That alone might raise some eyebrows. There's no indication that Jesus is known to the synagogue's leaders. If anyone invites him to say a few words, Mark doesn't mention it. It looks as though Jesus just strolls in and starts talking. His listeners are astounded that Jesus teaches "as one having authority, and not as the scribes." To clarify what that means, the scribes were brilliant religious scholars whose job it was to preserve, study, and explain the Hebrew Scriptures. They relied on the work of their most illustrious predecessors, citing arguments and interpretations made by prominent religious scholars to support their own points. It's something clergy still do. On any given Sunday, you may hear me quote a respected theologian like St. Thomas Aquinas, C.S. Lewis, or Rowan Williams. Pointing to them as recognized experts who agree with my take on a passage gives my own interpretation more weight. In essence, I'm borrowing a little of their authority to bolster my own.

Jesus's teaching methods are startlingly different from those of the scribes. He doesn't say, "according to Rabbi Such-and-Such, this passage means X, so we can conclude Y." Instead, Jesus speaks from his own authority, probably using the pattern of speech that he repeatedly employs in the Sermon on the Mount: "you have heard X, but I say unto you Y." Jesus made no reverent nods to the great Hebrew scholars of the past when explaining the Scriptures. His teachings are exclusively his own. Whatever he says in the Capernaum synagogue must ring true because the people are astonished by his methods, but not offended by his conclusions ... at least, not yet. Perhaps we can understand, though, how the religious leaders might be offended by Jesus's teaching technique. We know that Jesus is the only Son of God, uniquely able to

interpret God's law because of who he is, but the religious authorities do not. They would see Jesus as an uneducated Nazarene peasant who has no authority whatsoever to expound publicly on the Hebrew Scriptures. They would be outraged when he contradicts their teachings with his own. At first, the religious authorities are amazed by his audacity; they see Jesus as a nuisance, disrespectful and quarrelsome. Over time, however, they come to regard him as a dangerous heretic whose teachings profane God's holy law so badly that he deserves to die for them.

If Jesus's reliance on his personal authority to teach offends the religious authorities, his authority over unclean spirits must disturb them even more. People in the synagogue might not recognize Jesus, but the demon certainly does. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God," the creature shrieks. If you're fond of horror movies, you know that exorcisms require hours, if not days, of prayer and ritual. Some clergy can't perform exorcisms at all – they just aren't up to the challenge. But Jesus casts out this unclean spirit with a mere seven words, amazing those looking on. Two of those words, "be silent," are particularly significant. This is an example of the so-called "Messianic secret." In Mark's Gospel, Jesus repeatedly directs those who recognize him, human or demonic, not to reveal who he is until the time is right. The Messianic secret will come up again as we read Mark this year. For now, though, let's focus on the fact that Jesus has so much authority over demons that he can banish them without breaking a sweat. Again, we know it's because Jesus is exactly what the unclean spirit calls him, the Holy One of God. The religious authorities don't know that, though, so it's not unreasonable for them to wonder whether his exceptional power comes from an unholy source.

We scientifically oriented moderns might get a little twitchy about unclean spirits and exorcisms. Aren't such things just superstitious fodder for Grade B movies? I won't tell you what to believe, but the Episcopal Church takes such matters seriously enough that our Book of

Occasional Services offers credible guidance on exorcisms. (It boils down to “call the bishop.”) And if you can’t quite embrace the idea of demons as disembodied menaces or scaly monsters with pointy tails and leather wings, remember that evil is a shapeshifter. Rage, violence, hatred, and addiction are among the many ugly forms that evil gleefully assumes when it possesses us. God’s authority over evil is the reason that twelve-step programs work. Without the assistance of a higher power, breaking free from evil is exceedingly difficult.

Although Americans tend to be suspicious of authority, we can be awfully quick to give it away if someone demands it loudly enough. If you crave authority, there are several ways to get it. One way is to learn so much about a particular topic that you can claim to be an expert. For authority over other people’s bodies, businesses, or money, you can get a professional license as a doctor, lawyer, or financial advisor. You can climb the corporate ladder, gaining authority over your co-workers who are still on the rungs beneath you. You can run for public office, winning authority to make, interpret, or enforce the laws if you’re elected. In the church, you can seek ordination, which grants authority to fulfill various spiritual functions. For example, the Episcopal Church authorizes its priests to administer the Sacraments, preach the Gospel, absolve the repentant, bless in God’s name, consecrate the host and holy water, and (maybe) exorcise demons. None of these roles guarantees absolute authority, though. People have to accept your authority, and it can be taken away if you abuse it. Expert authority vanishes if you don’t keep up with developments in your field. You can lose an executive job, a professional license, or an election. You can be defrocked. Other people may decide that they no longer recognize or respect your authority. Even a monarch can be overthrown. Only God has absolute and eternal authority. That’s why Jesus, the Son of God, is the best model for how authority ought to be used.

Jesus exercises his authority not to rule, but to teach, heal, and bring the Kingdom closer. He explains the Scriptures in accessible language, using down-to-earth metaphors to which his listeners can readily relate. When banishing a demon or healing someone's apparently incurable illness or disability, he calmly gets the job done with as little drama as possible. When people start shouting his praises or calling him the Messiah, he quickly shuts them down. When the adoring crowds get too big and loud, he withdraws to a quiet place where he can rest and pray. Jesus is in it to glorify the Father, not himself. That's how authority is rightly used.

Authoritarianism is having a moment all over the world. There are too many egomaniacs demanding authority to tell the rest of us what to believe and how to behave. You're all intelligent adults who can make up your own minds about whose authority to accept and whose to resist. But I hope you'll consider how well aspiring authority figures measure up to Jesus before giving them your allegiance. If they push hatred, division, violence, or greed, they won't use whatever authority they seize to bring the Kingdom closer. And if, like some comic book villain – Loki of Asgard comes to mind – they claim to have been anointed by God to fulfill some glorious purpose that just happens to coincide with their personal ambitions, remember that Jesus never felt compelled to pound his chest and bellow about how much he deserved to lord it over the rest of us.

No one, no matter how well-intended or humble, can entirely measure up to Jesus. But we can learn from him that authority should only be wielded to bring the Kingdom of God closer to his children, no ego or empty theatrics involved. To paraphrase Paul, false authority puffs up, but love builds up. Whether we seek authority over others or grant authority to those who use it over us, may we remember that with great authority comes great responsibility to use it, as Jesus did, with enormous love and to the greater glory of God. *Amen.*