

AUTHORITY – 1. the power or right to give commands, enforce obedience, make final decisions.
2. such power delegated to another.

We are all familiar with authority. We think of elected officials, the police force, the principal at school, parents. A political candidate was late to a rally and going through the buffet line, he asked the server for two pieces of chicken with “I am starving.” “One piece of chicken to a person,” was her response. “Do you know who I am? I am a candidate running for president.” The server responded, “Yes, and I am in charge of serving the chicken. Move along.”

“Take thou the authority to preach the Word and to administer the sacraments within the congregation.” Those were the words pronounced by the Bishop as he placed his hands on my head to ordain me as an elder in the church. It had been a long road to ordination as an elder – four years of college, three years of graduate school with a theology degree, two years of probation, countless meetings with the Ordained Ministry Committee. Now I had the authority – designated to me by the power of the conference and conferred by the Bishop – to preach and administer the sacraments in the local church. It had been a long and meaningful process.

Of course, many people in our congregation are aware of this power delegated by another. The process of becoming a doctor and receiving that authority is a long and many times difficult process. Same is true of a lawyer, a teacher, a social worker, a therapist. We are familiar with the work and process that comes with receiving authority. What we do with that authority will be determined by our understanding of our task and our work and living out that task among the people.

Jesus and the disciples go to Capernaum. Capernaum was probably located at the North end of the Sea of Galilee, on the border of Herod Antipas’ territory. That means they had a toll booth or tax office. Capernaum was one of the important towns in Galilee. On the Sabbath, Jesus and the disciples are at the synagogue. The congregation at the synagogue are astounded at the teaching of Jesus. Why? Because he taught them as one having authority, “and not as the scribes.” It is important for us to understand this authority that astounds them. A scribe is an official teacher or expounder of the Torah. As a member of the school – the synagogue – a scribe would teach what he had learned from his master. That is the scribal tradition. A scribe had authority from the school – the synagogue – and backed up his teaching with endless quotations from those who spent their life interpreting the Torah. Their authority was one of books and tradition.

On the other hand, Jesus as a lay teacher of religion, not educated in the scribal manner spoke as one inspired by the divine spirit – spoke with an immediate and personal authority. Mark does not say he spoke as a prophet, but this is most certainly the impression the people had of Jesus. So much for the authority of the scribes.

In the synagogue, Jesus confronts a man with an unclean spirit. The expression “unclean spirit” is rare outside the New Testament. Was the spirit unclean or did demonic possession lead to uncleanness? What is uncleanness? In the scribal tradition it would be a disregard for food regulations, to touch a dead body – or it could be physical, actual filth.

“Jesus, have you come over the hills to work us harm here in Capernaum?” That is the question of the man in the synagogue. It is like he is saying, “Mind your own business. Go back to where you have come from. Don’t bother us and our way of doing. Don’t bother our profits – the way we do business here. I think as Mark understands it the answer Jesus gives would be, “Yes, I have come to destroy the demons and to undo their evil works.”

Continued -

PILGRIM

CHURCH

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Who is this? This new teaching was authenticated by the power to ban an evil spirit. Some text read, "Who is this and what is this new teaching that is with authority?"
"What is this? A new teaching – with authority!"

There are two responses to this New teaching – this authority of Jesus. One – the scribes and Pharisees were violently opposed to Jesus and to this teaching. Two – but there were others who began to open their minds. Their test was not – does it pronounce familiar words, quotes, positions? Rather for them the question is "What does it do for life?" This new teaching splits people into two camps.

I know it is not as simple as this example, but truth is – does the gospel exist to serve tradition – or does it bring a new hope for life?

Our class was discussing the role of the church for Christian life. One member in our class read out of Romans chapter one to try to prove that to be Christian you could not be a gay or lesbian person. God just gives up on them. To him, to be Christian meant the fulfilling of these words from a cultural tradition. Does this tradition bring life to literally thousands and thousands of people, or does it with an arrogant stance exclude them from the community of God? Of course he was speaking of authority that comes from tradition – authority that quotes word and tradition. To me, that kind of authority may not speak to a gospel that seeks to bring life. I am not a prophet and I don't have the authority of a prophet, but is it the role of the church to pronounce words and tradition that exclude anyone from the presence of God? It took us a long time to realize that the authority of slavery simply could not stand in a society that includes everyone. Slavery was overthrown by a new teaching – a teaching with authority that brought life. A teaching that said that black people were not inferior because of their color. A teaching that says life is not bound up in the color of a person's skin.

I believe the inauguration of Obama has ushered us into a new day. I know not everyone is willing or wants to agree with that. But this new administration will have authority if it reaches out to bring life instead of propping up traditions that no longer serve the common good. We have a chance to respond to the world with diplomacy instead of military might. We have a chance to offer education and health care to many in our society who are left out of this programs that bring life. We have a chance to use government for common good instead of self-serving traditions of the past.

There is an authority that is conferred through others. The use of that authority will be recognized only as it brings life, hope, direction for living together as a community. Let us, as a congregation be about using the authority given to us as the People of God to bring life – among ourselves and among our society.

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