

THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Psalm 111
Mark 1:21-28

David Brooks wrote a wonderful op-ed piece for *The New York Times* a while back bemoaning the erosion of authority—what he calls “institutional thinking”—by the individualism of modern culture, with its emphasis on personal inquiry, personal self-discovery and personal happiness. Institutional tradition—rules and obligations passed down to us by the institutions to which belong—can shape us and the larger society in which we all participate in a very beneficial way, Brooks suggests. But when the authority of our institutions breaks down, standards of right and wrong, of what is acceptable or unacceptable, are reduced to the lowest common denominator of personal taste and preference.¹

What ever happened to authority? I’d like to take that question back to Capernaum, that little fishing village on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, back to today’s reading from the gospel of Mark, where Jesus has just called his first disciples from among the fishermen there: “...and immediately on the Sabbath[, Mark says,] Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.” Why did people sense authority in Jesus’ presence? How did they recognize his authority and what was so compelling about it? It was his teaching. “He taught as one who had authority.” So, let’s listen. What is this teaching that so astonished Jesus’ hearers?

We don’t know. Not a word of Jesus’ teaching in Capernaum is remembered. Whatever it was that so astonished people that day was not written down for us to hear. You may rightly protest that Jesus’ teaching is remembered in other places—take those old “Red Letter Bibles,” in which everything Jesus said is printed in red. Yet, it is rather odd 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. In Mark, there is no Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew. Nor will you find many of the parables that appear so frequently in the gospel according to Luke. And we will never know what Jesus taught in Capernaum—we only know *how* he taught: “as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.”

That, too, is rather odd. For authority seems to be precisely what the scribes had! The scribes were professional students of the complicated biblical law. They could claim the authority of written words passed down through many 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 and power. But

¹ David Brooks, “What Life Asks of Us,” *The New York Times*, January 27, 2009.

somehow Jesus taught with authority surpassing all these claims. Somehow he was more compelling, more authentic to those who heard him. What sort of authority was this?

We keep listening, hoping Mark's gospel will reveal the answer.

Suddenly, we're interrupted by a mad man. Right in the middle of the service, perhaps in the middle of Jesus' sermon, we hear a wild voice, disruptive, disjointed, crazy. Where were the deacons? 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."

Jesus 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 witness of unclean spirits who acknowledged Jesus to be the Holy One of God?

Oh, we had hoped for something more. Yet, over and over in Mark's gospel it is the demons who know who Jesus is. Those who were crazy called him the Holy One; those who were sane put him to death. And when Jesus died, it was a centurion soldier, an outsider, who proclaimed, "Truly this was the Son of God!"²

In Mark's gospel Jesus himself is the content of the teaching. The authority is not in particular speeches, but in this particular life. Not in words, but in action. Jesus *lived* as one who had authority, an authority radically different from that of tradition. Different from what had been expected. To understand this authority, we must not only listen, we must also look.

We see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners; we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath day, silencing the scribes' objection not with an answer but a question: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?"³ We see Jesus moved by the feisty faith of a Syrophenician woman who dared to argue with him for the healing of her daughter.⁴ We hear questions as a source of truth, and we hear Jesus admit the limits of his own knowledge. When Jesus spoke about the end of time, he said: "Of that day or of that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only God."⁵ At the end of his life, brought before the council of religious elders and the power of the state, Jesus' authority stands in silence. "And 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."⁶ Though pushed to get rid of Jesus, Pilate could not get Jesus out of his mind.

Even in silence, Jesus taught as one who had authority. It is this radically different kind of authority which compels us to re-examine what authority means for us, to look

² Mark 15:39.

³ Mark 3:4.

⁴ Mark 7:25-30.

⁵ Mark 13:32.

⁶ Mark 15:44.

carefully at how authority functions, especially within the church. Jesus did not give us a systematic guidebook on authority. But, in Jesus' life, we have seen and heard clues of how his authority was made known in the world. The people in Capernaum were amazed, so that they questioned among themselves: "What is this? A new teaching!" I have felt, throughout my ministry, that when we hear and see this new teaching, we should be moved—if not toward clear answers—at least in certain clear directions.

In the first instance, the authority of Jesus moves us toward inclusion rather than exclusion. More specifically, this authority includes precisely persons who had been excluded before. Those invited into Jesus' rabbinic school included tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes, little children as models of the reign of God and foreigners as models of faith. We must, therefore, be suspicious of religious authority which moves toward exclusion, whose aim is to keep certain people out by written rule or daily practice. We must judge ourselves and our churches by Jesus' move toward inclusion.

Jesus' authority also values persons over rules or traditions. We see and hear this person-centered morality at every turn, but most clearly in Jesus' arguments with the religious leaders over the Sabbath laws and other written traditions. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to save life or to kill?" At another point, Jesus turned to the leaders and said, "You are making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on."⁷ As we collectively take stock at our Annual Meeting later this morning, I think one of the great strengths of Union Church is that it respects tradition without being held hostage to it. Worship here is dignified but playful, joyful. Governance is decent and orderly but unafraid to experiment. In our fellowship, we pass on the best of our past, but in a way that respects the future that even now is unfolding. In all these ways, Union Church seeks to convey the gospel in ways that resonate with those who participate here today, without rigid certainties and inflexible claims of authority. I hope you will continue to judge this institution and its path forward by Jesus' insistence in valuing persons more than laws.

And finally, I hope you will judge yourselves and this church by Jesus' acknowledgment of human limitation. We long for absolutes, but Jesus' authority was marked by admitting there were some things he did not know, only God knows. Theologian and poet Gerhard Frost tried 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

⁷ Mark 7:13.

are a contradiction
to our loose-leaf lives.⁸

We long for things to be clearer. We feel threatened when there seem to be two or more possible right answers. We would rather check “true” or “false”. But Jesus stands with us in the midst of our loose-leaf lives, promising to be present with us as we struggle together for faithful answers in this time of human history. If we can acknowledge that our human understanding is not the same as God’s, we may come to believe that the Spirit which dwelt with Jesus will lead us into truth which has yet to be revealed.

Jesus’ authority cannot be contained on a bumper sticker. It cannot be reduced to a slogan or a meme on social media. Nor is Jesus’ authority 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. Perhaps then we will stand with the outsider at the foot of the cross and confess, “Truly this is the Son of God.” In this Beloved One, I will put all my trust.

To the Lord who speaks to us, strengthens us, and blesses us with peace, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.

⁸ Gerhard E. Frost, *Seasons of a Lifetime* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1989), 57.