

Scriptures:

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21:23-32

Who's Authority

The synagogue leaders are almost always confused, or more likely threatened by the speaking and teaching of Jesus. As they hear him they begin to grumble and ask - What's this new teaching? By whose Authority do you speak?

Authority is a common question of our day. Even last night I was faced with such questions. Who gave this person authority to speak? I don't agree with everything this person says so they have no right to speak was the argument put to me. We are less likely to take someone at their word and more likely to first judge, research and criticize before we begin to listen. One of the hardest parts about being a leader in this generation is the judgment and questioning you receive long before you are accepted by anyone. It is hard to be both human and a leader but at this point it is the only option we have.

We are in a time where it seems every nation is struggling politically, striving to figure out the best route as leaders and countries. In the West where many thought we had figured things out we are now facing economic crisis and global upheaval and most days we find it hard to know who it is that has authority.

Perhaps we need to go back with the questioning temple leaders and ask who has authority here? But the better question to begin with might be what is authority anyway?

Authority in the dictionary has a lot of definitions but the ones that resonate with me are "quality that is respected, obvious knowledge and experience, source of precedent or principle and legitimate power."

Legitimate Power is a strong statement. I say that because I do not believe power and authority are the same thing. You can have one without the other – they do not go hand in hand. Power by definition is the "capacity to do something: physical force or strength, control and influence, political control, a person with power politically, financially, or socially is a powerful person."

Jesus spoke with Authority. And yet we know Jesus did not have power. He was not given position and prestige by the Pharisee's or any of the synagogue leaders. And yet he was able to speak and act in a way that his fame began to spread.

Is that not often true of those who have authority in our lives? Those we respect often live and act in a way that influences us much more than any specific lecture or teaching? And in fact those who demand respect and use their power over us often are people we don't respect at all in the long run.

When I think about teachers and colleges I have respected over the years they are always people who lived an integral authority. Who brought the best out of me without demand, but out of mutual respect and honor for who I was and who God was creating me to be. Authority for me will always be more influence than power over.

A key example of Authority rather than power is seen in the familiar life story of Nelson Mandela. In South Africa the apartheid leaders and government may have had the power for many years but a jailed Nelson Mandela had the authority in the end.

In the United States of America an Assassinated Martin Luther King Jr. had authority in the civil rights movement, and is now held up as the one who changed the face of racial discrimination in America. But in his time he held little power.

We as never completely satisfied Canadians rarely assume government has authority. We know they have power but we ask and wonder often what authority or what right do they have to do and be who they are. I believe it is still up to us to choose what sort of responsibility we give our leaders whether we give them power or require them to live out of integrity and authority.

Authority in the scriptures always comes from God. Authority in a way requires a sense of call – a knowledge of the larger picture – an understanding of who is ultimately in control. That is why Jesus and the prophets spoke and taught with Authority and not from a place of power.

Destructive power can certainly influence and alter people and situations but authority is pervasive because it speaks to the heart, it speaks to that created piece deep within that longs for justice and life. Authority does not depend on fear or threats, authority lives out of courage and trusts in what is right.

Jesus' authority always comes from God. I am sure that is why Paul always directs his readers to be more like Jesus. To live like Jesus by not looking to our own interest but to the interests of others and in that way we will be of the same mind as Christ Jesus. With this kind of living Jesus' authority time and time again overcomes those things in the world which traditionally have power.

The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad asked

“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."¹ The leaders wouldn't have questioned it if they couldn't perceive it.

It is interesting to note that throughout the gospel of Mark we are not told what this teaching was. In Mark where Jesus is named teacher and prophet he doesn't make fancy speeches or lectures – often it is just his presence that speaks to his authority. In Mark, there is no Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew. Nor will you find many of Luke's parables."

Strange however, For authority seems to be precisely what the scribes had! They could claim the authority of written words passed down through many generations... They had the prestige of religious leadership, the authority of clerical position and power. But somehow Jesus taught with authority surpassing all these claims. Somehow more compelling, more authentic to those who heard him.²

Jesus lived as one who had authority, an authority radically different from that of tradition. Different from what had been expected. The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad goes on to remind us that in this authority

We see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners; we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath day, silencing the scribes' objection ... We see Jesus moved by the feisty faith of a Syrophenician woman who dared to argue with him for the healing of her daughter.

With Jesus We hear questions as a source of truth...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."

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 carefully at how authority functions, especially within the church. Perhaps authority should not come from those who wheeled their power and make threats, perhaps it should come from the servants, the spirit of truth, the scriptures and the teachings of Jesus.

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.

¹ The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad "A New Kind of Authority" Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Speaker
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² IBID

When we hear and see this new teaching, we are moved ~ if not toward clear answers ~ at least in certain clear directions.

The authority of Jesus moves us toward inclusion rather than exclusion. In fact the authority of Jesus includes precisely persons who have been excluded before... Those invited (by) Jesus included tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes, little children as models of the reign of God and foreigners as models of faith. Jesus' authority always values persons over rules or traditions.

Jesus' authority overcame the evil of shutting others out. He broke open the possibility of all being invited in to the kingdom of God. Jesus taught a new teaching, with integrity and welcome and that gave him authority. His teaching was that love will always prevail, it will always bring you to new life. His authority was found in his welcome. He seemed to understand that most of us do not fit into the righteous boxes created by legalism, rules, religion and laws.

This scripture caused me to ask myself once again - What has power in your life? What has authority? So often we give power to that which excludes. We give power to fear and disappointment. But in doing so we give power to evil.

What if we gave the authority to light and love as Christ does?

What if we chose to truly believe that God has great things for us as individuals and a church community? (not just mediocre but great things!)

What if we chose to spend our time in prayer and worship discerning who and what God is calling us to? I believe then those things that hold us back, that keep us from fullness of life would no longer have power. I believe we would live differently, look forward differently, vision and dream differently.

I invite you this week to ask yourself Who or what has power in your life? Is it an addiction, a force of exclusion, a legalism or a fear?

Who has authority? Is it the kind of integral authority Jesus offered that we are called to live into? Do you use power in your life? Or do you live authority?

Jesus said I have come that all may have fullness of life may we forever live the kind of authority he longs for all of us to live and offer.

John Van DeLaar

We praise You, God,
that Your Way is found
not by travelling an exclusive highway,
or in secrets preserved only for some,
but in the open field of love and grace,

where all who choose may come and play.

We praise You, Lord God,
that Your Truth is heard
not only in the words of scholars and authors,
or in brittle, inflexible ideas,
but in honest questions
and difficult conversations,
in the courageous attempts of simple people
to live lives of integrity.

We praise You, Lord God,
that Your Life is discovered
not just in the predictable places of beauty and wealth
or within the confines of clearly demarcated norms,
but in the unexpected generosity and pride
of those who have nothing,
in the creativity and risk
of trying new things,
and defending the vulnerable.

We open ourselves again to Your call,
determined to do what we promise,
to follow Your Way,
to embody Your Truth
to share Your Life.
And to do it all with thanksgiving and praise.
Amen.