

Re-claiming Authority¹—Mark 1: 21-28
(January 28, 2023-4th Sunday after Epiphany)

What comes to mind when I say the word, authority? Sit with that for a moment. Our reactions, I think, depend on our experiences with authority and our relationships with authority figures—parents, teachers, coaches, doctors, police, social media influencers. These relationships are influenced by the power dynamics that are inherent in the differences brought about by the prejudices and stereotypes of skin colour, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation and more. Many factors go into whether authority is a benign, comforting concept or a problematic, even dangerous one. The concept of authority is rife with controversy in our times. Misinformation and dis-information are at all time highs, there are exposés of abuses of power by police and powerful men, there’s an erosion of trust in institutions.

It seems that every time we hear about authority in the media, someone is hoarding it, lording it over others, abusing it or victimizing others with it. As people on the Jesus path, it is incumbent upon us to ask, “How is the Christian to relate to authority?” Henri Nouwen, the late theologian and spiritual writer said; a person with great authority who has nobody to be obedient to, is in danger of becoming authoritarian, a person who is very obedient and claims no authority of their own is in danger of becoming a doormat. Both are spiritually dangerous.² An authoritarian person abuses their authority in trying to act like a god; a doormat abdicates their authority by refusing to claim their God-given authority and giving it to others.

The gospel of Mark today says of Jesus; “They were astounded at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority...” which is interesting, at this stage of his ministry Jesus is a nobody in conventional terms—a carpenter from the hick town of Nazareth, far removed from Jerusalem, the centre of the Jewish universe. He has no real power; in fact he is under the authority of some pretty powerful religious and political systems. Jesus is no authoritarian. Yet, his lack of conventional sources of power doesn’t mean he is a doormat either. He is bold and assertive, astounding his audience with his teaching, influencing them, touching something in them. So, what’s going on?

I am always intrigued by word origins, by etymology. The root of the word authority is of course author. In Latin the word author means, the power to create.³ Authority has its origins as a word in creating and creativity. The author Ernest Hemingway once says something to the effect of “Most of the time I write as well as I can, sometimes I write even better.” Creative power seems to involve more than just the individual; it’s more as if the individual is a channel for that power. In the Christian tradition, we call that

¹ This reflection relies in certain parts on my memory of a sermon preached by the late Rev. Dr. Maurice Boyd. The title and date are unknown to me.

² *Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith*, April 11th entry.

³ *Online Etymology Dictionary*,

<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=author&searchmode=none>

power, God. Jesus has authority because he is obedient to that God power, that creative power working through him. Jesus' authority is not grounded in an ego driven agenda, his authority is grounded in obedience to a call to play his unique part in God's unfolding creation.

We instantly recognize people who are obedient to this creative, sacred authority. We know it when we experience it. In everyone who allows God-derived authority to flow through them, there is a sense that there is something mightier and greater at work than simply themselves; they are channels for creative power. There is something about this kind of authority that makes us willingly obedient to it, we submit ourselves voluntarily, not by fear or force. It doesn't manipulate us or seek to control us but calls us to be our true selves and play our part in moving creation toward healing and wholeness. That's an important distinction, God-derived authority is never about the one through whom it flows. We feel safe around that kind of authority, we feel secure, accepted for who we are and listened to. We know that something good and life-giving will come from our encounter with such people. I wonder if there are people who come to mind for you, people in your life who've been channels for God-derived authority?

My late friend, Austin is like that for me a few years ago. I meet him while he is doing some supply ministry at my then church while I study to become a Minister myself. At the time Austin has been a United Church Minister for some fifty five years. I'm instantly drawn to him and his down to earth, no guff approach to Christianity. He becomes a mentor to me. Austin has a certain wisdom mixed with humility. I say this because he doesn't lord his wisdom or experience over me. He listens a lot. He asks a lot of questions. He empathizes. Every once in a while he gives me a gem—a story or a bit of advice. He does it not because he wants to show me how smart he is or how much I have to learn, he does it because he feels it will help me grow, it will help me play my part in God's creation. He does it because it serves my interests, not his. After I finish seminary and I'm about to head off to northern Ontario to my first church, Austin and I have coffee. I think at the time he senses that I looked up to him a little too much. So, as an ordination gift he gives me one of those multi-tool things, you know they have a couple of knife blades, a file, a small saw, a screw driver etc...The message I don't get completely get in the moment, but that soon becomes clear is there are many ways to be a Minister, mine is not the only way, find your way. Austin was helping to author me, to create me, to grow me as a Minister and as a person. Because of his selflessness, his compassion and his listening ear I willingly submitted myself to his authority.

It's this kind of authority Jesus wields in his time, something with which the principalities are unaccustomed, it confounds them; it's an authority that isn't about manipulating or controlling others to fulfil an agenda and it isn't self-seeking. The kind of authority Jesus practices finds its roots in his spirituality, in his relationship of surrender to God. The Christian spiritual journey is always one of surrender. The invitation is to relinquish our own agendas and ego demands so that we can claim our birthright as children of God and become channels for love, playing our part in God's creative work. In the week to come I invite you to reflect on this in your own life: are there areas of your life where

you're being called to let go of your own agenda, to set aside your ego, to let divine authority flow through you? Are there areas of your life where you're being called to no longer be a doormat, to claim your authority as a child of God, as one worthy of being a channel for the divine? What support or help might you need to do this? The invitation in both these questions is to be co-authors, partners with God in the ongoing work of creation.

The greatest claim Jesus ever makes for himself is that he is totally derived from God. Don't look at me he says; look at the one who sends me, from whom I derive my authority. That, in a phrase is the Christian life, to be partners with God in creation—to re-claim authority, not as something to lord over others, but as a creative force that attracts others to us, that invites us beyond our fears into new frontiers of relationship and healing. May we be blessed with obedience to this sacred authority.

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