

As One with Authority
Mark 1:21-28

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January 28, 2018

This story from Mark's Gospel has a strange ring for us today. But then again, lots of scripture has a strange ring to our ears. This one, however, is almost jarring. How are we to respond to that one word, *authority*? Unlike the religious leaders of his own time Jesus spoke *as one with authority*.

We live in a fairly anti-authority time. Perhaps mistrust is a better word; we mistrust authority. There was a time and not too long ago when tacit and even unquestioning authority was granted to certain figures who represented institutions: teachers, doctors, police, politicians, CEOs, military officers, clergy, judges ... the list goes on. Then those positions of authority lost their absolutism. In many instances trust was broken and so authority was questioned and even restrained. If any of you have seen the recent movie *Post* you will recall how authority that had become absolute was exposed by those whose First Amendment right it is to expose such things ... the press.

And if you have been following the recent trial of the abuser of young women gymnasts and the culture of institutional indifference or even concealment of their abuse, you have the cameo example of the abuse of authority.

Authority. We still have it by institutional definition: parents with children, bosses with workers, generals with troops. It may be questioned or even rebelled against, but it is still largely in effect. Democracies make sure that no power is unchecked. In certain historical moments totalitarianism rises, dictators and fascist movements unfold with no checks or balances. The question always is: How much authority is conferred and what are its limits?

There is a difference between sheer power and authority. The Lion is the king of the jungle because he can mostly kill everything else; I'm bigger and stronger so therefore I have more power. My nation's weapons are bigger or my economy is more formidable therefore I can bully you or try to bully you.

I'm the bigger sibling so I can make you do what I want. The school bully is stronger so makes others do what he/she wants. **Power exercises sheer external force to get what it wants.**

Authority is different than that. **Authority is generally conferred** upon a representative of a group by the group to lead.

We confer authority on those who enforce the law because we need people to keep us from killing and harming one another. We confer authority on the justice system to make sure people all play by the established rules. The church confers authority on clergy, for example, to lead their flocks. And universities confer authority upon a faculty to teach and evaluate its students. Hospitals confer authority on its medical personal to conduct its various procedures. It is not absolute power, but it is conferred authority. How much depends on the institution and the culture in which it operates.

There is also something called **moral authority**. It comes not because it has been conferred by an institution as much as because that person represents either a great tradition or a great source of truth.

Poets, writers, artists, musicians or prophets fall into this category because they speak for the soul of a generation or call into question the current state of affairs or values. Every great poet, artist or prophet of his/her own time critiques the world and offers up an alternative vision. It might be in continuity with a tradition or represent a departure from it, but authority is found in the courage, voice and vision of one who dares to swim upstream against the dominant narrative of life. They have authority conferred upon them by those who know they are speaking and demonstrating a powerful truth.

So when we hear Mark say that Jesus did not speak like the religious elites of his time, but rather as one with authority, what did he mean?

Well, it certainly was not that of raw power; he contended with raw power around him and in the end raw power killed him. It was not solely conferred power like that of the Temple priesthood, the leaders of religious parties, or the doctors of the law who were authoritative by virtue of their mastery of the tradition. The authority of Jesus was different than those.

The authority of Jesus arose somewhere between received tradition (his Judaism) and his moral authority. And in no place is this seen more clearly than in his teaching we find in the Sermon on the Mount. It is there that we find the formula that made him different.

Jesus often said that the tradition, the law, wasn't going away but that he was a fulfillment of it. But he did that fulfilling in an unusual way. Here is the Jesus formula. "You have heard it said ... but I say to you..."

"You have heard it said love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say love your enemy."

"You have heard it said you shall not murder, but I say do not even be angry with your neighbor."

On and on it goes. "You have heard it said ... but I say to you." In other words, the Bible, the law, the tradition says this ... but I have a deeper, more essential word about it." He is at once interacting with the tradition and exceeding it.

We would say that as a rabbi he had some conferred authority – speaking for the tradition – but most of his unique authority was moral authority – he spoke a word of truth that resonated because it was true and people knew it. And he delivered that in an evocative and compelling way.

What gives a person the most moral authority is if they live the truth that they talk. They believe it, live it, and say it.

Remember what he said about the Sadducees and Pharisees, people with conferred authority in his day? Do what they say but don't do what they do. They are blind guides.

So I want us to think about how the authority of Jesus, that moral authority grounded in knowing and living the truth, is so compelling today. And I want you to think about why you find that so compelling today in people you encounter, living or dead.

I was standing in a buffet line this week and overheard one person talking to another about a conversation between Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. I instantly guessed they were reading their conversations in *The Book of Joy*. Here are two very different perspectives on finding peace and living out of tranquility, a Christian and Buddhist view presented side by side, and it is powerful because both of these luminaries of the spiritual life do have moral authority; they have both spoken truth to power, lived at different times under persecution, had to overcome their demons, and found a path of faith or enlightenment. They both share a moral authority unlike, say, pure academicians, those who know their religious tradition but don't practice it, and those who have never really had to venture anything, taken a risk, spoken with their own voice.

And so their words and actions ring true with authenticity. They do not evidence some big overlay of hate or greed. And both of them, in their own ways, have clearly said throughout their lives, "You have heard it said ... but I say to you."

For me I hear an authoritative voice when it seems to be connected to a power beyond the ego of the person. I hear an authoritative voice when it rings true and courageous in the face of a terrible evil spirit that may haunt the land. I hear an authoritative voice when it stands out from the crowd and is not simply one of many mindless ones that goose step down the road in formation.

We hear it when Robert Frost says "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

Did you? Should we? How did you know? How can we? What stirring of the Spirit may we trace? You have heard it said to go that way ... but I say go this way.

The Gospel of Mark says that Jesus spoke with authority, unlike the religious professionals, the doctors of the law, the transmitters of tradition. His source was above and beyond those. And it caused people to leave their old lives and trek with him into the unknown. It caused people to follow a star that was more compelling than anything they had ever known before. There comes a time when you push all your chips out into the center of the table and call. Only one who speaks with real moral authority is worth that. And I think people long for that more than anything today.

I've always wondered if people were persuaded by Jesus' unique authority not only because of his daring teaching, but because he was also a healer and exorcist. In fact, as Mark speaks about Jesus' unique authority he is teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, his adult home town. Right in the middle of worship a man cries out with the many voices of that spirits that have possessed him. Like always, the spirits are squatters who are terrified of being evicted. They recognize the spiritual authority of this rabbi and ask if he has come to kill them.

It's like a scene from an old western; the outlaws are terrified when the new sheriff rides into town. With his spiritual authority Jesus ordered the spirits to be silent and then to leave the man; and so he fell to the ground, convulsed and the spirits came out of him with a loud shriek.

I think that the forces of darkness that haunt our world and our souls know when the light is dawning and their time is short. The inferior parts of ourselves are terrified of dying. They will kick and scream and resist and lash out, anything but depart, exit, die. It is only spiritual authority that they recognize and fear.

If people knew that Jesus had an authority unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees in his teaching, they doubly knew it through the force of his spiritual powers of healing.

I have witnessed this many a time, in one form or another. I wait for the new truth to be revealed when the words are spoken, "you have heard it said ... but I say to you."

I look for the spirits to flee in disorder as people are liberated from bondage.

If we as a congregation have real authority in our own time, it will be for these very same reasons. People will hear an authentic wrestling with tradition that leads beyond tradition, to the essence beneath tradition. People will experience liberation in the Spirit. And they will know even as we know: “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place, I can feel God’s mighty power and God’s grace.”