



## HE TAUGHT AS ONE HAVING AUTHORITY

Sermon preached by the Reverend Carol Cole Flanagan on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, June 1, 2008. RCL Readings: Genesis 6:9-22; 7:24; 8:14-19; Psalm 46; Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-28; (29-31); and Matthew 7:21-29.

*... the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.* (Matthew 7:28-29). In the ancient Mediterranean world, the practice of authoritative teaching was to cite authorities recognized by the people. In a society in which one's authority is determined by one's status, to speak on one's *own* authority was a challenge, especially if you were at the bottom of the social order as Jesus was. That may be why the authority of Jesus comes up so frequently in scripture.

*About the middle of the festival Jesus went up into the temple and began to teach. The Jews were astonished at it, saying, 'How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?' Then Jesus answered them, 'My teaching is not mine but the One who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own.* (John 7:14-17).

The religious leaders of Israel had a problem with Jesus. He doesn't have the right credentials. He did not have the benefit of a seminary education. There were no letters following his name. He does not represent any of the recognized rabbinical schools. Where does he get his authority? What gave him the right to teach about spiritual matters?

He answers that question by saying, "*My teaching is not mine, but the teaching of the One who sent me.*" His authority is all about the author.

As you may suppose, law libraries are filled with legal precedents. When a lawyer argues a case before a judge, the lawyer will cite other cases that have already been decided. But if a case goes before the Supreme Court, then precedence seldom carries much weight. And why? Because it is the Supreme Court that make the precedent in the first place. There was no precedent for Jesus because *Jesus was* the precedent - he wrote the rules of the game.

When Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts, he was running hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

“Excuse me,” Governor Herter said, “do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?”

“Sorry,” the woman told him. “I’m supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person.”

“But I’m starved,” the governor said.

“Sorry,” the woman said again. “Only one to a customer.”

Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around.

“Do you know who I am?” he said. “I am the governor of this state.”

“Do you know who I am?” the woman said. “I’m the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister.” (Bits & Pieces, May 28, 1992, pp. 5-6.)

So what exactly is authority? I came across 32 definitions and quit there! Here are a few for our purposes this morning. It is the capacity to secure compliance from others based on the possession of a recognized right to legitimately claim obedience. Authority is obeyed because the one issuing commands is believed to have the right to do so. It is the right to influence, control or direct the actions of other people. Authority can be given by law, by custom, by understood rules of morality or by consent of the person under authority.

Jesus carefully defined his authority by pointing to God as the source of his teaching. In John's gospel he says, "...for I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me." "He will come back to this again and again. (John 12:49-50).

- "...the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." (John 8:26),
- "Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.'" (John 8:28).
- Or, "The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works." (John 14:10).
- Or, "for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (John 17:8).

Jesus said to his followers, "...All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. " (Matthew 28:18; John 3:35). The people recognized that Jesus was a man of authority because they recognized God in his words and actions. His disciples and all who listened to him constantly marveled at his authority and power (Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32).

Authority isn't always recognized. For centuries people believed that Aristotle was right when he said that the heavier an object, the faster it would fall to earth. Aristotle was regarded as the greatest thinker of all time, and surely he would not be wrong. Anyone, of course, could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a great height to see whether or not the heavier object landed first. But no one did until nearly 2,000 years after Aristotle's death. In 1589 Galileo summoned learned professors to the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Then he went to the top and pushed off a ten-pound and a one-pound weight. Both landed at the same instant. The power of 2,000 years of belief was so strong, however, that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right. (Bits & Pieces, January 9, 1992, pp. 22-23.)

So what did the authority of Jesus look like? Here are some examples.

- I. It was seen in his teaching. After the Sermon on the Mount, we read “the people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Matthew 7:28-29; Luke 4:32). In this sermon, Jesus said repeatedly, “You have heard it said... but I say to you...” words that superseded earthly authority.
- II. Jesus had authority to forgive sin, something only God could do, a divine prerogative if you will. Jesus said of himself, “...the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he then said to the paralytic—’Stand up, take your bed and go to your home,’ “and he did.(Matthew 9:6). He forgave the woman caught in adultery. (John 8:11).
- III. The authority of Jesus was revealed in miracles. He healed every kind of sickness (e.g. Mark 1:34; Matthew 8:1-17) prompting people to glorify God. Jesus delegated to the disciples the authority to heal and perform miracles in his name (Matthew 10:1).
- IV. We find in scripture his authority over nature. The One who is the Word of God and active in the creation of the world calmed the raging sea by merely speaking the words, “Peace, be still!” (Mark 4:39). And so it was. Word and act are one. The disciples were frightened and called out, “Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!” (Mark 4:41). Jesus cursed a fig tree, and the power of his word alone caused the tree to wither and die (Mark 11:12-14; 20-21).
- V. We see his authority over life and death. He raised the dead to life with just a word. And in regard to his own life and death said, “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.’ “(John 10:18).
- VI. Last, we see his authority over evil. He freed people from bondage to Satan, (John 10:10; 8:34-36; Hebrews 2:14-15; Luke 19:10), cast out many demons and had authority over them (Matthew 8:16). The first epistle of John tells us that the very reason Jesus is revealed as the Son of God is to destroy the works of Satan (1 John 3:8). In Mark’s gospel, he does not even let the demons speak (Mark 1:23-27).

As you've heard me say before, when God speaks, something happens, and you had better look out. There is no difference between word and action. They are one and the same." This also true of Jesus. His authority is recognized because he is able to do what God does.

I'm going to close with one last tale. In *Proceedings*, the magazine of the U.S. Naval Institute, Frank Koch tells the following tale.

Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow."

"Is it steady or moving astern?" the captain called out.

The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain," which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, "Signal that ship: 'We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the signal, "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees."

The captain said, "Send: 'I'm a captain, change course twenty degrees.'"

"I'm a seaman second-class," came the reply. "You had better change course twenty degrees."

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send: 'I'm a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.'"

Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

We changed course.

(Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Word Publishing, 1991, p. 153. Stephen Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, etc.)

The Captain had the advantage of rank but he didn't have the capacity to secure the compliance of the lighthouse. So much for authority!