

With Authority!

I am not much of a basketball fan. As you all know, baseball is my sports passion, in part because it is mostly played, even at the highest level, by regular sized guys who don't look all that different from me in terms of height and weight. I think that might be part of the appeal of hockey for me as well although not football... but who can escape football in the good ol' U.S. of A.? As for basketball, though, well, as the character I played in Lanford Wilson's award-winning play, "5th of July," said, "I've just never been that interested in... a bunch of sweaty ectomorphs." I did follow basketball a little bit in the late 60s and early 70s when my dad's cousin, Bill Bradley, was with the New York Knicks, and again when we lived in Houston and the Rockets of Hakeem Olajuwon and Clyde Drexler won back to back NBA championships. Like America in general with football, Houston was obsessed with basketball in those days, so again, how could I escape it?

I think it was during that second spate of basketball watching on my part, in the era after board shattering dunks had become commonplace, that I became aware of a common catchphrase among basketball announcers. When I'd watched the Knicks more than 20 years before, their young announcer, Marv Albert, had been famous for his call of "Yessss!" when a Knickerbocker launched a successful jump shot. Kids on the playground mimicked him when their own attempts were successful. But later, in the Rocket's era of the 90s, Albert's call for a dunk had become the big thing. Whenever one of those sweaty ectomorphs levitated magically above the rim and slammed the ball through the hoop, Albert's call was, "With Authority!"

Perhaps it is simply further proof of how oddly my brain works that as I was reading this morning's passage from Mark, specifically verse 27, Marv Albert's basketball jargon came back to me: "A new teaching—with authority!" I doubt that's really how they said it in the synagogue in Capernaum but it did get me to thinking. What is it that we mean by authority, anyway, and how do we react to it? More importantly, how was Jesus' authority, as perceived by those Galileans that morning, unique? How does it still impact us, these two thousand years later? We'll spend some time with those questions this morning and I'll also look at the lectionary's Old Testament passage for the morning because there do seem to be some clues there.

As defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, authority means, "power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior." This lines up well with the Greek word used by Mark here, "εξουσια," which is often simply translated "power." In Marv Albert's use of the word "authority," we see the remnants of the most primitive human understanding of authority or power. Those oversized athletes used their raw physical power to leap high and hurl the ball downwards. The dunking "with authority" was a pretty morally neutral use of that physical power – ultimately, a dunk can neither heal nor hurt even though your enjoyment or lack thereof may be pretty extreme depending on which team you are cheering on. But as we all know, the use of this type of brute power or authority can be far from morally neutral. Let's take an example from a classic cartoon, Elzie Segar's "Popeye." I'll bet that most of us remember Popeye the Sailor Man, whose power came from eating his spinach. He was bedeviled by a fellow sailor, the enormous Bluto, who picked on Popeye and his Pap and tried to make off with Popeye's girlfriend, the waif-like Olive Oyl. While we'd all like to think that physically gifted people would share Popeye's instinct to protect women, children and the weak, we know that a lot of strongmen are much more like Bluto, using their strength to take what they want regardless of the wishes or rights of others. This is why we are grateful for positive emotions like

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compassion as well as for law codes like the Torah or the Magna Charta or the Bill of Rights. These things keep society from deteriorating into the Law of the Jungle, “red in tooth and claw.”

Of course, by those laws, ancient and modern, we set up another type of authority. Laws don't mean much unless they are enforced, so we have systems of law-keepers to go with our lawgivers. We often call these people “the authorities,” meaning that our ordered society has given them the power to maintain the order we desire. Again, we hope that those civilly appointed authorities keep their oaths to exercise their publically given power for the public good but we know that sometimes they do not. Or we may, for some reason, be in opposition to the vision of public good which guides them. Another of my leftover memories from the 60s and 70s is the oft-seen bumper sticker or fabric patch that read, “Question Authority.”

Here we have, then, two commonly recognized types of authority to which we have a relationship that is ambiguous at best. It seems unlikely that either of these descriptions was what Mark or the people of Capernaum had in mind when they described Jesus and his teaching as having authority. It is much more likely that they were referring to what we call “moral authority.” We usually use this phrase in reference to a person who has neither physical strength nor official power but who instead commands our respect by the virtue of their own integrity and alignment with other qualities that we associate with moral goodness such as justice and compassion. Writing on this passage, Katherine Matthews Huey says, “Even a corrupt judge or police officer has “authority,” but the simplest, poorest person in the world can speak with a different kind of authority if they embody wisdom and integrity that others find compelling. Each one holds a different kind of power, one from the outside, and one from within.”

Jesus' power, his authority, came not from an external source but from his own relationship with his Heavenly Father. This is what caused both the amazement of the simple folk of Capernaum and the enmity of those who had officially recognized civic and religious authority in Jerusalem. Because Jesus was secure in his own authority, he had no need to cite authoritative sources as he told people of God's love for them, of God's desire to free them from the chains of their past, and of how God's reign was being manifested among them. This was not the practice of the scribes of the day, who carefully filled their sermons with references to the teachings of the great scholars of the past, much like academics today with papers or preachers like me who make the Scriptures both their jumping-off point and their landing point with reference to the work of better preachers and scholars along the way. Jesus' connection to the source of all wisdom was unique. He had no need for humility about his understanding of the Father's will for those who saw and heard him saw and heard God. The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus said to Phillip, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.”

Jesus, like Moses, had what the Children of Israel had begged God to spare them – an unmediated experience of the Divine. Like Moses, Jesus was the mediator between God and God's people. Moses heard God's voice on the mountain and in the Tabernacle of Meeting but Jesus spoke with God's voice throughout his ministry. Moses was only allowed to see the hindermost parts of God on the mountain so that he would not be consumed by God's glory but Jesus was the very image of the Father and, John says, we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father's only son, full of grace and truth. In his intimate relationship with the Creator, Jesus

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fulfills the prophecy from Deuteronomy which I read earlier and overturns the wistful ending of that book: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform... and for all the mighty deeds and... displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.”

In trying to make sense of what they had seen in Jesus, the early Christians linked their experience to the promise in Deuteronomy. For them, Jesus fulfilled God’s pledge to raise up a prophet like Moses. This understanding is recorded twice in the Book of Acts: in Peter’s sermon in chapter 3 and in the sermon of Stephen in chapter 7. Most Jews of Jesus’ time believed that this prophecy had in fact been partially fulfilled several times, by each of the prophets whose stories or words are found in the Old Testament, but they also believed that the time of prophecy was over. In Christ, we find the ultimate fulfillment of the prophecy, although, as I will mention later, not the final fulfillment. In Jesus, Peter and Stephen and their fellows saw not only one who had intimate knowledge of God but also one who, like Moses, had performed mighty deeds and displays of power.

Power... authority... once again we turn for clues about the authority of Jesus in the power that he manifested. Moses performed his mighty deeds in the service of bringing liberation from slavery to the twelve tribes of Israel. Through Moses, God brought bread to hungry people and water to thirsty people. Through Moses, God healed people who had been struck down by the results of their rebellion against their loving, liberating God. Jesus performed his mighty deeds in the service of bringing liberation to all Creation. In Jesus, we find the Bread of Life and the Everlasting Water for our hungry and thirsty souls. In Christ, we find healing from our brokenness and rebellion and selfishness and sin. That day in Capernaum, people heard a life-giving word from Jesus and they were astounded. They saw him heal a broken life and they were amazed. “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”

This is the difference between the authority of Jesus and the other types of authority I mentioned earlier. Jesus authority is always connected to giving life. Those other types of power, physical power and civic or externally granted power, can be misused. We are right to “question authority.” But Jesus’ authority, the supreme example of the inner authority of moral suasion, need not be questioned because it is always for our good. Bruce Epperly writes, “Jesus’ authority leads to healing and wholeness, inclusion and hospitality. Jesus’ power was for good. His words and actions promoted creativity, agency, growth, and interdependence.” The power of Jesus, the power of the Creator, the power of the Holy Spirit, is always about bringing abundant and everlasting life. The power of God is the power of love.

The power of Jesus, the authority of Jesus, is still available to us as the Body of Christ. As our sisters and brothers in the United Churches of Christ famously reminded everyone in their advertising campaign a few years ago, “God is still speaking.” Through the Holy Spirit, which proceeds from the Father and from the Son, we can hear the voice of God, the voice of Christ. Unlike Jesus, we do not always hear God’s voice clearly. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, we see through a glass, darkly. We do not have a full picture of the will of God, so we must retain our spiritual humility. We must test our understanding against the Bible, against the wisdom of other Christians both from our own community and from those of other communities and other

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times. Above all, we must test what we perceive as the authority given to us against the litmus of Jesus' life and teachings. Hear another bit of wisdom from Bruce Epperly's remarks on this passage: "We must always ask the following questions: Does an authority figure promote justice, creativity, and beauty? Does an authority figure seek what is truly best for the community, including honoring diverse opinions and lifestyles? Does an authority figure enable people to be more creative, more adventurous, and more compassionate?" If any authority figure we feel called to follow measures up in these ways, then we can have trust in them. If we feel ourselves moved to act or to speak in ways that answer these guidelines, then we should feel free to act or to speak.

Because, as I said earlier, Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to send another prophet like Moses but he was not the final fulfillment of that promise. In fulfilling our calling as the Body of Christ, we are called to speak out against the life-destroying forces that still plague God's good Creation. As the Body of Christ in this place, we are called to act against the physical powers and external authorities that would bind others in slavery, that would promote injustice, that would mar the beauty of Creation. We cannot speak God's word perfectly, as Jesus did. But we are still called to make use of what light we have to be a beacon for those who struggle in darkness.

God promised to send God's people another prophet like Moses, one who would faithfully speak the words of God, one who would see God face to face. And prophets came, great men and women of God who spoke for justice and love and faithfulness. Sometimes the people heard them and Israel was delivered from the captivities that they blundered into. Sometimes the people refused to hear the prophets. Sometimes they even killed them. And so defeat followed defeat and destruction followed destruction and captivity followed captivity. And never was there another prophet who saw God face to face – until Jesus. And some people heard him and their lives were changed. But some turned away and plotted against him and him, too, they killed. But that wasn't the last word. God raised that one whom they had crucified and in his resurrection is the victory for us all. And in the physical absence of Jesus, God sent the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, who comes to us and lives within us and guides us to carry on with bringing Good News to the poor and sight to the blind and release to the captives and proclaiming God's Year of Jubilee to all people – God's reign of love and justice and peace and truth, the Beloved Community that makes us all sisters and brothers, where all wounds are healed and all Creation is set free. We are empowered, my sisters and my brothers, to do and to say all these things, "With Authority!" Amen.