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“Authority”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas
4th Sunday after Epiphany (Year B)
January 28, 2018
Mark 1: 21-28

You’ve seen the bumper stickers before. “Question Authority” they proclaim. The phrase appears on t-shirts as well, and even the occasional button. The sentiment, made popular in the seventies, is frequently attributed to Benjamin Franklin: "It is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority".

Back in the 60s and 70s when this phrase was being lived out rather blatantly, the word authority left a bad taste in the mouths of a lot of people. One preacher reflects:

Authority for us meant all that was oppressive or repressive in society: those persons and institutions that were in the business of maintaining their own power or promoting their own ideology. Authority meant those in charge of things who perpetuated white privilege, male privilege, and the

privilege of the wealthy. Authority was what suppressed human life and spirit, imprisoned rather than set free.¹

It doesn't seem that things have changed all that much since the 60s in terms of authority, does it? After all, the questioning of authority, for all who follow this bumper-sticker-line-of-thinking, comes about when we see people abusing power, *demanding* respect rather than earning it, *assuming* authority rather than living into it. In our world today, it seems that authority is questioned everywhere we turn. Accusations of fake news, or lying politicians, or the horrendous abuses of authority and power that have come to light through the #MeToo movement – these questionable “authorities” are all around us.

Miriam-Webster defines authority as the “power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior.” We know from experience that some people are *given* authority by virtue of position: Elected officials have the authority to make decisions, police officers have the authority to enforce a law, a teacher has the authority to teach a class, a doctor has the authority to make a diagnosis and write a prescription. I could go on and on. Authority can also come by virtue of wisdom, age, privilege, education, and/or experience. In our congregation, we know that David and Judy Smith are authorities on

¹ From a sermon by Lisa Kenkeremath, www.goodpreacher.com, as shared by Nancy Jo Dederer in a paper she presented at our preaching group, *Lectio Jubilare*, in January 2009.

birds. They have travelled around the world studying and photographing birds and have given numerous presentations from their research. Their authority on birds is unquestioned. Others of you have given your life to certain topics or areas, and by virtue of knowledge and experience have become authorities in your own area of study.

Most people who have authority never need to claim it. In fact, to do so actually takes away their authority. Other people who desire authority try to demand it, diminishing whatever little authority they might have had in the first place: The mother who yells at her cowering child, “You WILL listen to me! I am your mother!” or the teacher who bullies his class, demanding their attention because “I am in charge here!,” or the elected official who brags about power and threatens those who disagree with him.

If authority, as Miriam-Webster says, is the “power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior,” it must involve those who are willing to be influenced or commanded. In my experience, that requires respect.

In my own life, growing up as a student in middle and high school, it became clear to me that some of my teachers and administrators lived into the authority of their position, while others did not. Some gained my ultimate respect

and the respect of others because they did not abuse their authority, did not make it oppressive, did not use it to elevate themselves and their own privilege while pushing down others around them. The ones who demanded submission to their authority, who assumed authority and didn't earn it, were the ones I questioned – some on a fairly regular, though not always productive, basis.

Authority cannot be assumed, it must be earned.

When the UNC men's basketball team went up to Virginia Tech this week, a lot of authority was assumed. After all, they were reigning national champions. They were ranked 10th in the nation. They had won numerous games using their famed smaller line-up. They had won some close, final-second games and were still one of the best rebounding teams in the nation. Somewhere along the way, though, they got a little too comfortable with the expectation that they would win. All credit goes to Coach Buzz Williams and his Virginia Tech team who on that day earned their basketball authority, and UNC couldn't do a thing about it. Authority assumed means nothing. Authority earned and demonstrated means everything.

Now believe it or not, all of this brings us to our passage for today. Mark is a writer of few words, and so here we are still in the first chapter and all manner of things have already taken place with Jesus. In today's passage he begins his work

by going to the synagogue with his four new fisherman disciples. This band of brothers has followed Jesus to Capernaum and when the Sabbath comes, they, like the good Jews they are, go to the synagogue. All is well until Jesus begins to teach. Normally, a good Jew would come to the synagogue to *be* taught, not to do the teaching. But it soon became clear that Jesus is a different kind of teacher. Those who hear him are “astounded” because he speaks as one having authority - not the kind of authority that comes with a robe or a title (like the scribes and Pharisees), but the kind of authority that is earned through words and actions, the kind of authority that speaks without the motive of gaining or keeping anything and without the fear of losing anything either.

And then class is interrupted. Mark uses one of his favorite words (*euthys*) to imply a change in direction and an impending urgency. Immediately – suddenly – a man appears with an unclean spirit and starts to speak, only it isn’t really the man speaking but the spirit within him. This unclean spirit knows who Jesus is. The Holy One of God. And he is afraid. As well he should be.

Jesus shuts him up right quick – “Be silent!” he tells him and then calls the spirit out of the man and that must have been some kind of sight, one that we can’t even begin to imagine, with all the theatrics of a good Harry Potter movie, and the people stand around with their mouths gaping and their eyes wide. “They were all

amazed,” Mark writes. And they look around at each other incredulously. “What just happened? Did you see that? He’s the real deal. He’s the real authority. He’s the one to watch.” If Twitter had been around back then the tweets would have been flying. This is big news. A man who teaches and acts with authority. A man who can’t be questioned or ignored. “At once,” writes Mark, “his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”

Famous Jesus. And for the rest of chapter one the people are very happy with him. But then Jesus goes from being the helpful healer and demon-fighter to being a trouble-maker who is crossing boundaries the people (particularly the religious leaders) aren’t ready to cross. Jesus takes on more authority than they are willing to give him: he forgives sins, breaks Sabbath laws, and eats with tax collectors and sinners. We joke about it now, because it seems so ridiculous. But it wasn’t ridiculous then. Back then Jesus’ actions are not a laughing matter, they are a serious breach of religious law. And a whole lot of people aren’t happy with this man who threatens their own perceived authority.

I doubt this bothers Jesus very much. After all, Jesus already knows who he is. He has already stood in the Jordan River and seen the heaven’s rip open and the Spirit come down and the voice from heaven claim him as *Son*, as *Beloved*. Jesus knows what he is there to do – heal the sick, feed the hungry, cast out the demons,

give sight to the blind, bring good news to the poor, comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable, question the authority that so many think they have, forgive sins, be rejected, go to the cross. Jesus knows what he is there to do.

He is there to turn the world on its head. He is there to create holy chaos. “In such a world,” writes Brian Blount, “you would either go with the man and help him create the holy chaos he’s creating or you find a way to do everything you can to stop him so you can get your people back in line.”²

I believe Mark’s gospel urges us to ask ourselves, “What, then, are *we* going to do? Stop this Jesus and get things back in line? Get authority back where it belongs? Or are we going to follow the authority of Jesus and participate in the holy chaos of love he’s creating even here, even now.

Writer Annie Dillard knows the chaos Jesus leads us into. “It is madness [she writes] to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares: they should lash us to our pews.”³

² From *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, by Brian Blount and Gary Charles.

³ *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, p. 52.

You know what she is talking about, right? About the chaos that *does* ensue when we claim the authority of Jesus and live and preach and teach the message he lived and preached and taught. About all people being loved equally in God's eyes. About inclusive, unconditional love. About forgiveness, humility, and reconciliation. You know what happens when we start believing what Jesus said. And doing what Jesus did. Just look back in history. Chaos ensues!

Chaos ensued when Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Reformers of the 16th century dared suggest that the church might be corrupt, misguided by greed and power.

Chaos ensued, and war even, when some people dared suggest that African slaves should be set free.

Chaos ensued, and war even, when some dared challenge Adolf Hitler's claim of a superior race.

Chaos ensued in the civil rights era when Martin Luther King, Jr preached about racial equality and blacks and whites dared to stand together and suggest that Jim Crow laws were wrong and that blacks were equal in all ways to whites.

Chaos ensues today when we dare suggest that the poor are not being cared for, that health care is a right, and that too many laws benefit the rich and corporate America.

Chaos ensues today when we fight the effects of white privilege, when we challenge the injustices in our prison system, when we welcome refugees and protect our immigrant sisters and brothers, when we listen to the voices of women abused by those who claimed authority.

When Jesus cast out that unclean spirit at the beginning of his ministry, I think he knew that chaos awaited him, even perhaps that death awaited him. I think he knew that the world wasn't ready for a message of such radical love and inclusion in God's arms of grace. I think he knew. And still he preached. And still he taught. And still he healed and loved and walked onward toward the cross. And still he calls us to follow him. Into the chaos even. Because he knows that being in the chaos with love and forgiveness, grace and hope, joy and peace, is endlessly better than being in the world without those things.

So strap on your crash helmets and buckle up your safety belts. Because though it might be bumpy, it will be the most incredible adventure of love you can ever imagine. The one with authority is calling us to follow him into the chaos.

Let's go, friends. Let's go.

Amen.

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Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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