

## Re-claiming Authority<sup>1</sup>—Mark 1: 21-28 (January 28, 2018-4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany)

What comes to mind when I say the word, authority? Our reactions to that word I think depend on our experiences with authority and our relationships with authority figures. For example if you grew up white and middle class in a suburb I would say it is quite likely that you would have a positive association with authority figures like the police. It might be a different story if you grew up black and poor in an urban core. The concept of authority is taking a beating in the news right now—whether that be the revelations of sexual harassment and assault as a result of the #metoo movement, the treatment of racial minorities by police or the portrayal of immigrants by the U.S. administration.

It's hard to have a nuanced conversation about authority when all we see is people 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 is in danger of becoming a doormat. Both are spiritually dangerous.<sup>2</sup> An authoritarian person abuses power by acting like God; a doormat gives the power of God to others.

The gospel of Mark today says of Jesus; "They were astounded at his teaching for he taught them as one having authority..." What does Mark mean? At this stage of his ministry Jesus is nobody, 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.

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.<sup>3</sup> Authority is about creating and creativity. The author Ernest Hemingway once said 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 power God. Jesus had authority because he was obedient to that God power, that creative power working through him. Jesus' authority was grounded in obedience to a call to play his unique part in God's unfolding creation.

We recognize instantly people who are obedient to divine authority. We know it when we experience it. In everyone that allows divine authority to flow through them there is a sense that there is something mightier and greater at work in them than simply

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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

<sup>3</sup> *Online Etymology Dictionary*,

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

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. 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.

Has someone like that ever come into your life? My late friend, Austin was like that for me. Austin had been a United Church Minister for some fifty five years. I met him when he did some supply ministry at my then church while I studied for the ministry. I was instantly drawn to him and his down to earth, no guff approach to Christianity. We stayed in touch for a while and he became a mentor to me. Austin had a certain wisdom mixed with compassion. I say that because he didn't lord his wisdom or experience over me. He listened a lot. He asked a lot of questions. He empathized. Every once in a while he would give me a gem—a story or a bit of advice. He did it not because he wanted to show me how smart he was or how much I had to learn, he did it because he felt it would help me to grow, it would help me to play my part in God's creation. He did it because it served my interests, not his. 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 was this kind of authority that Jesus wielded, something with which the principalities of his time unaccustomed; it wasn't about manipulating or controlling others to fulfil an agenda and it wasn't self-seeking. Perhaps that's why Jesus confounded those in positions in power. The kind of authority Jesus' practiced found it's 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 the call is to let go of your own agenda, to set aside your ego in order to let divine authority flow through you? Are there areas of your life where the call is to stop being a doormat and claim your birthright as a child of God, as one worthy of being a channel for the divine? What support or help might you need in order to do this? The invitation in this is to be co-authors with God in the ongoing work of creation.

The greatest claim Jesus ever made for himself was that he was totally derived from God. Don't look at me he said; look at the one who sent 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 a source of oppression or violence, but as a creative force. Inviting us beyond our fears into new frontiers of relationship and healing. May we be blessed with obedience to this holy authority.