

EPIPHANY FOUR, YEAR B, JANUARY 28, 2024

Do you remember when you were a child and you wanted to do something but your mother or father said, "No.?" When you asked why they said, "Because I said so, that's why." And it worked because it was a way of reminding you of who was really in charge – who had the authority.

Authority is a funny thing isn't it? It can be used for good but more often it is abusive and it permeates all facets of our lives. Whether it is from an individual or an institution, authority dictates a lot of how we live our lives.

In today's gospel reading from Mark we are told that Jesus "taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." What was this authority and what was so compelling about it. Ironically, we're not told what Jesus taught them that day only that a "man that was possessed" recognized what his authority was truly about.

It's funny that in Mark's gospel, over and over again, it is the ones who were considered possessed that knew who Jesus was and called him the Holy One; those who were sane put him to death.

However, if you look at Mark's gospel in its entirety, we do find out what he taught. Jesus himself is the content of the teaching. The authority is not so much in his teachings, but in how he lived his life. Jesus lived as one who had an authority radically different from that of tradition and different from what had been expected. His authority always pointed toward the liberating power and love of God. And that's what Jesus' authority consists of; not the power of control over others, but the unique capacity to touch people's hearts, to have compassion that removes boundaries and barriers.

The authority of Jesus moves us toward inclusion rather than exclusion. More specifically, this authority includes precisely people who had been excluded before. It is what theologians call an authority "from below." Those invited into Jesus' life included tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes, little children as models of the reign of God and foreigners as models of faith. When institutional religious authority moves toward exclusion, and whose aim is to keep certain people out by written rule or daily practice they are not practicing Jesus' authority. We also have to judge ourselves and our churches by Jesus' authoritative move toward inclusion which is the ability to see one another as a child of God in need of human kindness and understanding.

The late Verna Dozier wrote about the church and said, "In Jesus, God came into history to create a people who would change the world, who would make the world a place where every person knew that she or he was loved, was valued, had a contribution to make, and had just as much right to the riches of the world as every other person. That is what the Church is all about, (or should be) to bring into that vision, that ideal community of love in which we all are equally valuable and in which we equally share."

Unfortunately, I think we have been failing in this vision for quite some time. Why else would so many people have a negative view of the church and religion in general. An Episcopal priest and consultant Tom Ehrich has said, "We have become known as judgmental, angry, self-serving, smug, boring, and old. As far as people outside can tell, we live to fight, we think too highly of ourselves, and we are moral scolders. Who needs that?" Who wants that?

But, we say, we're not like that so we look to blame other outside forces for our decline. We blame the nones – the ones who say they are spiritual but not religious for their choice not to be involved in religion. Yet the church has excluded many of these people because they were the wrong sex, immigration status, sexual orientation instead of focusing on matters that Jesus authority demands of us such as finding ways to dismantle racism, inequality, demagoguery, and those things that dehumanize and exclude others. As a result, people turn away from us. They're skeptical when we do extend our goodwill because they expect only moralizing and judgement will come.

We also blame other outside forces like sports and social activities that occur on Sunday. Ehrich said, "Long after Sunday changed character in American life, we kept expecting Sunday worship to do our work. Rather than recognizing and adapting to this change we continue to insist people sit in pews on Sunday for an hour of singing, praying, announcing, chatting, communing, and learning and figure we've done our work.

The truth is the church is no longer the center for social activity or contacts as it was 50 and 60 years ago. Our pews are empty because people are finding life elsewhere. Let me say that again. People are finding life elsewhere and that includes a spiritual life.

The reality is we are at a crossroads and we are floundering as to what to do. There is no magic solution and after 40 years as an ordained priest I have seen, just as many of you have, various programs that would evangelize our neighbors so they will come fill our pews. How has that worked out?

We're so caught up in trying to figure out ways to get butts into our pews that we have forgotten that our mission is to get our butts out of our pews and get outside of our respective church walls to find out what the needs are. Now many of our churches offer a lot of programs such as food pantries, day cares, safe spaces for self help groups and that is what we should be doing with our buildings. But what about all the people who don't fall into those categories. What are their needs? What is it that they need or want? What are people around us seeking and searching for.

When you're at a crossroads you have decisions to make. Do we continue down the path we're familiar with that consumes us in maintaining the status quo and minister just to ourselves and stay invested in maintaining what has been till we close our doors or are we going to step out in faith into the unknown and try seeking what could possibly be? Do we challenge ourselves to take the other path out into the world, see what the needs are, and rethink how we do things in response to those needs.

The Strategic Visioning Group of the diocese has published a mission and a vision statement that's worth reflecting on. The mission statement is "Join us in following Jesus Christ with bold acts of justice, peace, and love. The vision Statement is "A world transformed, where all Creation knows God's life-changing love".

They're very simple statements. How do we live into those statements? In my stewardship letter this past fall I said that our three churches are embarking on "writing the next chapter." How will our episcopal presence in our communities look like and possibly change? How do we rethink how we gather and when we gather that might be more universal to others outside our walls. How do we provide safe spaces for people to talk about faith, God, spirituality while being respectful and encouraging?

We are so bound by our structures both physical and institutional that it often dictates what we think church should be. How do we get past being wedded to our particular physical structures and our ways of doing ministry? A friend of mine recently said this about the decline in our churches; "It will not be because we were not welcoming enough, inclusive enough or anti-racist enough. It will be because we were too proud to rethink our relationship to power". Power are those things that we have engraved in stone i.e. the way we've always done things, that hold us back.

Every year the Episcopal Pension Fund sends a calendar to every episcopal church in the country and each month has a cartoon. This month's cartoon has a bishop speaking with two priests and says, "As we observe a week of prayer for Christian unity are you in for the proposed merger of your congregations. The two priests respond "I'm in bishop" while over their heads is the bubble that says "as long as they come to my church and agree to keep doing things the way we've always done them"

My friends, we cannot fall prey to that way of thinking anymore. We are being called by Jesus' authority of inclusion and love to step out of our comfort zones into a new season of ministry. We are all in different places but bound by our common episcopal family. This is our chance to see what God desires to accomplish next in and through us. Remember, it's not about getting butts into our pews but getting our butts out of pews into the world.

The theologian Walter Bruggeman wrote a poem "Blown by God towards Newness" which captures this sentiment.

The news is that God's wind is blowing, It may be a breeze that cools and comforts, It may be a gust that summons you to notice, It may be a storm that blows you where you have never been before. Whatever the wind is in your life, Pay attention to it." Where is God's wind blowing us? What newness is out there for us? Together we are the hands and feet of Christ so let us together practice his authority of inclusion, love, and compassion and step out in faith into the unknown. Amen.