

EPIPHANY 4, YEAR B, JANUARY 31, 2021

This morning's gospel is a story about Jesus' first public debut in the town of Capernaum. He is seen as a nobody until he speaks and teaches and then people start to perk up and pay attention. What he says carries a truth and power that Mark says he taught as one having authority. So, my question to you this morning is who or what has authority for you? Where do we find authority today?

Two quick stories about authority. A man came home to find a notice in his mailbox that was a certified letter waiting for him to be picked up at the post office. On closer examination of the notice he saw the certified letter was from the IRS. I don't know about you but a certified letter from the IRS would definitely put me in panic mode. All kinds of things go through your mind. What did I do wrong? Am I being audited? Do I owe thousands of dollars? For this person the waiting was excruciating since he got the notice late Friday, his post office was closed on Saturday and Monday was a holiday. So, he didn't pick up the letter until Tuesday. When he opened it, he discovered he owed the government \$197.60 and they wanted it right away. He didn't care what the circumstances were or why he still owed the money, he just wanted to get it paid and the IRS off his radar screen. I guess we can all say the IRS has authority over us.

The second story is a legend about Galileo wanting to disprove Aristotle's theory that a heavier object falls to the ground faster than a lighter one. The legend says that 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 instance. However, the power of belief was so strong in Aristotle's theory that the professors denied their eyesight. They continued to say Aristotle was right. Begs the question, about whether authoritative facts can outweigh your beliefs? Where do we find authority and do we place authority in the right things or people?

Back to today's gospel lesson. Mark says they were astonished at Jesus' teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." Why did people sense authority in Jesus' presence when he was so easily dismissed before he spoke? How did they recognize his authority and what was so compelling about it? What was this authority that Jesus had that the scribes didn't?

After all the scribes were the men in the community that had authority! They could claim the authority of written words passed down through many generations. They had the authority of tradition ~ a kind of laying on of hands from the time of Moses. They had the prestige of religious leadership, the authority of position and power. But somehow Jesus taught with authority surpassing all these claims the scribes could make. This authority was somehow more compelling, more authentic to those who heard him. What is this teaching that so astonished Jesus' hearers? What sort of authority was and is this?

In Mark's gospel Jesus himself is the substance of the teaching. His authority is not in particular speeches, but in his life. Jesus lived as one who had authority, an authority radically different from that of tradition. Different from what had been expected. To understand this authority we must not only listen, we must also look at what Jesus said and did.

First of all, from the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus spoke new things, unlike anyone had heard before: about the Hebrew law, about how people should love and treat one another, about priorities and what's important in life. And he spoke and taught as the Primary Source, not a mere commentator like the scribes did: He talked about

unconditional love, about a classless and egalitarian society where all care for one another, an all-inclusive, all sharing world without master or slave, Christian or Jew, male or female, rich or poor— it was radical then, and it is radical now!

Jesus' teaching, his very life, liberates the people from oppressive power and points toward the liberating power and love of God. And that's what Jesus' authority consists of; not the power of command over others, but the unique capacity to touch people's hearts, to liberate them to an extent they had not previously thought possible.

That's what the authority of Jesus does. It moves us toward inclusion rather than exclusion. More specifically, this authority includes precisely persons 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. I think we need to be suspicious of any authority which moves toward exclusion, whose aim is to keep certain people out by written rule or practice. We must remember Jesus' move toward inclusion.

That's exactly what the late Verna Dozier wrote about the church. She 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, to bring into that vision, that ideal community of love in which we all are equally valuable and in which we equally share. Every structure of life comes under the judgment of that vision: our politics, our economics, our education, our social structures. Even the Church! Nothing is exempt from that challenge. And every member of the Church who lives and works in any of those structures is called to carry the message that this structure will be redeemed to the glory of God." That's huge, that's transformative, and that's the kind of personal and collective liberation—from all the authoritative powers that keep us from living lives that are focused on anything less—that is possible when we allow Jesus to be our teacher and authority. We will be set free to participate in God's creative work in the world.

So how do we participate in Jesus' authoritative power of love that transforms us to be a part of God's kingdom here and now. Dean Hollerith of Washington Cathedral said, "As people of faith who see Jesus Christ and his teachings as a primary source of authority, I think we are called to orient our lives towards that goal. If we have faith in a God of love, a God of justice, a God of peace—then we have a different, a higher authority to proclaim. As disciples of Christ, we are called to be bridge builders, reconcilers. After all, that is what Christ came to do—to reconcile us to God, ourselves and one another. As people of faith, the church must be a place that is willing to build bridges between people. Yes, we must stand up for what is right, we have to defend the truth, but we have to do so with open hands and hearts, willing to embrace the other even when we are positive they are wrong. Building bridges is tough and lonely work." As someone told him, if you are going to be a bridge builder then you have to be prepared to be walked on because that is what bridges do, they span the divide and get walked on.

As Christians who claim a higher authority, we must remember that God is in charge and we are not. We must remember that our job is to be faithful, our job is not to be right. Our faith teaches us that we are fallible creatures, who don't have all the answers and we often get things wrong. I know we wish life would be clearer when there seems to be two or more possible right answers. However, Jesus stands with us promising to be

present with us as we struggle together for faithful answers. Remember Jesus' authority is not a word to hurl at our opponents rather his authority comes from the love of inclusion and that makes all the difference. We need to focus on Christ's authority of inclusive love so it can shine forth from us and have a profound impact on the way we live and move and have our being in the world. For in the end Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and frankly that's the kind of authority we all desperately need. Amen