

Mark 1:21-28 1.31.21 Pastor Bill Uetricht 4 Epiphany

I know you are going to find it hard to believe this, but when I was in seminary, because of a confrontation that I had with one of the professors, rumors were circulating among the staff that I had *authority* issues. Now truthfully, the man who started the rumor had big-time authority issues, but still, the comments got me thinking about my and our relationship to authority. And the events of the recent months have really gotten me thinking about issues related to authority. I am starting to wonder if indeed we don't have a crisis over authority and leadership in our culture.

And I don't say that with any political intentions in mind. It seems that we moderns have been given the impression that we don't really need to be led, that we are our own authorities. We can make it on our own, you know. But the events of the recent months are telling me what a lie that conclusion is. I am convinced, and this is probably just my opinion, that you and I are wired to be led. We will find an authority or a leader any way we can, even if we think we are our own authorities.

I couldn't help but think of that as I watched what happened in our nation's Capitol a couple of weeks back. There are so many young men (and yes, women) in our nation who are looking to be led. Oh, they present themselves as independent, strong actors. But many of them are anything but independent. They are drug along by actual leaders or by the leaders they manufacture in their own heads. We may think that leadership and authority don't matter, but let's tell the truth. We all have authority issues.

Perhaps some of you have become acquainted with the Q-anon phenomenon. It's an online conspiracy group that is convinced that our government is being run by a group of cannibalistic, Satan-worshiping pedophiles. Many in this cult showed up at the Capitol a couple of

weeks ago at the direction of Q, who probably manufactured this crazy conspiracy theory from the recesses of his basement and passed it on through the recesses of the dark corners of the Internet. But loads of people follow this craziness. Modern folks! What's up? We long to be led. We will find authority and leadership any way we can. Look at the gangs in our city streets. Pay attention to the odd and dangerous Proud Boys, the all-male club that has been responsible for a lot of violence recently. The members of these groups are seeking authorities who will lead them.

Authority is the issue in our gospel reading for today. Jesus has gone to Capernaum, an important community in Galilee. And while there he enters an authoritative place, the synagogue. He has just been baptized, just called his disciples, just started his movement. And immediately, he's involved in a confrontation in an authoritative center.

But the confrontation initially is quite friendly. His teaching is well received; the listeners seem to approve. Mark tells us that ["the listeners] were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having *authority*. Well, interesting. These listeners are looking for something, something authoritative, something that will help them lead their lives in a way consistent with the God they know. Jesus, at this point, seems to be that authority. The crowds are impressed with his authoritative teaching, contrasting it with what they are getting from the folks labeled *the authorities*. "He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

A little confrontational put-down of the scribes. The scribes were the interpreters and regulators of the Jewish law. They were the authorities you went to to get advice on legal matters. They are said not to be authoritative, like Jesus is. Wow! I think in Jesus we are experiencing a very different notion of authority.

And we encounter that different notion in the next thing that happens in the text. A man with demons confronts Jesus. Note who is in church, by the way. Demons! We tend to think that it is mostly prim and proper church ladies and church men who show up in church. But the Bible is much more realistic than we are sometimes. Don't be surprised to discover that evil is often hidden among the good. But that is another story for another day.

A man with demons confronts Jesus, expressing great fear that the demons' lifespan may be quite brief. And his fear is warranted. Authoritatively, Jesus tells the demons within the man to shut-up and to come out of him. And that is precisely what happens. The demons go bye-bye.

And the crowd again notes Jesus' great authority. "They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A New teaching—with authority.'" It's a new day with Jesus, a new authoritative day. His words and his deeds match each other. There's a congruence between what he says and what he does. There is an authenticity to who he is. It intrigues me that the words *authority* and *authenticity* have the same verbal root. They must be connected.

Many authorities in our own time lack authenticity. Q from the Q-A-non conspiracy club is not even known. He is an anonymous figure. Now isn't that just convenient? And isn't that just telling? Hiddenness is seldom a platform for true authoritative leadership. Jesus is in the public square. He is not manipulating. He is confronting, telling the truth and setting people free.

Setting people free! This is what good authoritative leadership does. It sets people free. The man with the demons is set free. These demons have been controlling his life, running his show, causing him to be alienated from all kinds of folks. And Jesus authoritatively lifts the burden from him and reconnects him to community.

Sadly, when we think of authorities, we focus on people who are “in charge.” And yes, authority sometimes involves a degree of in-charge-ness. The world doesn’t work very well when people in charge don’t take charge. But sometimes that in-charge-ness ends up looking more like control and even oppression. And so, authority ends up being equated with raw power. Authorities are those who have power over us. Authorities are those who have their thumbs on top of us. Many people with difficult bosses, many women with controlling and violent husbands have lived with this kind of authority.

But this is not the authority of Jesus. Jesus’ authority doesn’t keep people tied up with his need to control them. Jesus’ authority sets people free. Jesus’ authority unloosens the demons that want to keep us bound, that want to separate us from each other and even from ourselves. Jesus leads us into the land of freedom.

One of the primary stories of the Bible is the Exodus story, which is all about God taking us out of the land of oppression and putting us into the Promised Land of freedom. Much of the New Testament reworks that story, because the author of existence is thought to be One who leads us away from that which binds us and oppresses us. True Jesus-style authority doesn’t keep us in the slavery of Egypt but leads us to a good land where we can thrive, where we aren’t controlled by other people’s power over us, where the past’s shadow over our lives doesn’t overwhelm us, where we are not led by our addictions, our compulsions, our preoccupations, our resentment, our anger.

I don’t know if you note what I note. But it seems to me that a whole lot of people are angry these days. And while anger sometimes is a good and healthy emotion, especially when it is directed at injustice, it is a miserable lifestyle. It is a kind of addiction. Too often anger is a clear sign that we aren’t free. We’re bound up. But Jesus sets

us free. His authority is not one that binds us up in anger. His authority is one that moves us beyond the confines of the past, beyond the power of resentment, beyond the unhealthy control that other people have of our lives. If the authority that is leading you makes you angry all the time, it's time to find your authority someplace else. Jesus wants to set you free.

We all have authority issues. We all need to be led. But being led sometimes can be a matter of slavery, not freedom. Some people will lead you astray. They won't lead you to freedom; they'll keep you bound. Jesus, the authoritative one, takes us into freedom because Jesus leads us to God, the one in whom true freedom is discovered.

The great theologian Scott Gearhart said to me the other day that perhaps the real issue at hand isn't so much that we need to be led—that's a no-brainer—but that leaders need to be led. What makes Jesus such a powerful leader is that he is led by something larger than himself. Jesus' life is transparent to God, to love. He is being led by love, which is why he is worthy of our following. If those who lead focus our attention only on them and ultimately, only on ourselves, then we are probably not being led into freedom. We are being enslaved.

But Jesus, the authentic one, the one who sets us free, always points beyond himself to the greater one, to the author of love. He will go to the cross because love has authority in his life. To follow this authoritative one is to allow love to author our lives.