

## With Authority

A Drug Enforcement Administration officer stops at a ranch in Texas and talks with the old rancher. “I have to inspect your ranch for illegally grown drugs.”

“Okay, but don’t go in that field over there.”

The DEA officer verbally explodes: “Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government with me!” Drawing himself up to his full height, he reaches into his pocket, removes his badge and officiously displays it to the rancher.

“See this badge? This badge means I am allowed to go wherever I wish, on any land! No questions asked or answers given. Have I made myself clear? Do you understand?”

The rancher nods politely. “I’m sorry,” and with that, he goes back to his chores.

A short time later, the old rancher hears loud screams. He looks up and sees the DEA officer running for his life, with the rancher’s big prize bull in hot pursuit. That bull’s gaining ground on the officer with every step and it seems just a matter of seconds before the officer will be gored.

The rancher throws down his tools, runs to the fence and yells at the top of his lungs: “Your badge! Show him your BADGE!!”

That officer’s badge was purported to be a symbol of authority. The dictionary defines *authority* as “the right and power to command, enforce laws, exact obedience, determine, or judge.” When you think of authority figures, what images come to mind? And whose faces? When you were younger, those faces probably belonged to your parents and teachers. If you were in the military, it was the face of your commanding officer. In the workplace, it was the face of your boss. Who else represents authority? The federal, state, or local government? The police? The Internal Revenue Service? Your view of authority may have evolved as you’ve matured.

Some of us in this sanctuary are baby boomers. Born in the years after the second World War, some baby boomers came of age in the nineteen-sixties, in a time of seismic change. Some members of this generation protested and marched and demonstrated. Some grew their hair long and wore colorful, unconventional clothing. Some boomers considered themselves and their friends countercultural and anti-establishment—

members of a generation who didn't trust anyone over thirty—not, at least, until they got to be over thirty themselves!

It was a generation that questioned authority.

But maybe—to one extent or another—every generation has a bit of a rebellious streak. I recently read an essay written by an elderly Winnsboro woman, who lamented that young people lack the proper respect for their elders that was shown when *she* was a girl. Interestingly, her complaint about disrespectful young people was written nearly eighty years ago, in *nineteen-forty*. She herself had been born and brought up in the eighteen-hundreds.

Could it be that *every* generation has issues with authority?

What about the people of Jesus' time? We think of them as living under the mandates and the ordinances and the precepts of scripture.

But one fine sabbath day in Capernaum, worshipers in the synagogue hear a new teaching. A different kind of teaching. It isn't like what they're used to hearing from their scribes, from the teachers of the law who are grounded in the ancient traditions. No. This sabbath, the good people of First Synagogue, Capernaum, hear a guest rabbi. And this rabbi, this Jesus of Nazareth, astonishes them. For he teaches as one with authority.

Now you and I don't get to find out just what it is that Jesus teaches on this day. Mark the evangelist doesn't tell us. Mark's Gospel is more about action and not so much about words. But we have a pretty good idea how Jesus' teaching differs from the scribes' teaching. He speaks in a way unlike any other.

The scribes probably begin most of their commentaries with the words "according to Moses" or "according to the prophets." They interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. They quote and they quibble. But we know that when Jesus speaks, he often begins with the words *very truly, I tell you*. Hear that "I tell you"? Jesus doesn't defer to the authority of someone else. Jesus teaches with his *own* authority.

And I invite you to reflect with me on what characterizes that authority.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy helps us understand that the authority of Jesus is *prophetic*. We believe that Moses is speaking of Jesus when Moses tells his people that God will raise up a prophet like him—like Moses—and that that prophet will be listened to. That prophet will have authority. A prophet is one who speaks for God. A prophet is one who has God's words.

Jesus Christ not only *has* God's word, he *is* God's Word. The authority of Jesus Christ is ***the authority of Scripture***. Dietrich Bonhoeffer affirms that “preaching is the Christ himself walking through his congregation”—not because of any particular skill on the preacher's part—but because Christ is the very Word of God.

So—imagine yourself in that Capernaum synagogue. As Jesus teaches, you and all the others listen. Amazed. Transfixed. Listening to a message of truth like none you've heard before. The only sound in the place is the sound of his voice. When—all of a sudden—a disturbed, deranged one appears in your midst. A person seized and gripped from within by an oppressive force. A spirit of darkness. Disrupting, interrupting. Bringing the service to a halt. A *screeching* halt. Shrieking! Screaming! Until Jesus speaks. *Quiet! Get out of him!* And immediately, it does. The authority of Jesus is ***greater than the power of evil***.

Jesus the Christ has power over every evil force in this world. In the Capernaum synagogue, Jesus casts out a demon from a suffering man. And Jesus—when we draw near to him—casts out every demon that possesses us and plagues us today.

Cleanses our frenzied spirits. Calms our anxieties. Heals our afflictions.

This man's affliction has been discerned by Jesus. Who recognizes suffering. Who is intimately acquainted with suffering. Who knows what it is to suffer. Who knows what suffering looks like.

He is the One who speaks to your deepest needs. Who reaches into your tenderest places. Who touches and soothes your innermost hurts. This Jesus is all compassion. The authority of Jesus is *compassionate*.

But we live in a time when respect and esteem for authority—compassionate or not—have been eroded by a prevailing popular culture that champions individual rights and self-reliance and independence and making one's own decisions and being the captain of one's fate and not having to answer to anyone. A culture that prizes freedom, perhaps more than it values authority.

So we're intrigued when we learn that the Greek word our Bibles translate as *authority* also means *it is free*. As Stephen Hultgren points out, "Authority is the sovereign *freedom* of one who acts without hindrance."

My brothers and sisters, the authority of Jesus Christ is *freeing*. It frees us from the compulsion to be in control. It frees us from our obsessions with ourselves, frees us from continually looking inward, frees us to keep our eyes on him. The authority of Jesus Christ frees us from being afraid to admit our desperate need of this Holy One of God who leads and guides us. Frees us from being afraid to confess that without him we are nothing, but in submitting to him we receive everything.

In our hearts, we acknowledge this truth: truth not only for you and me, but for all God's children everywhere. The authority of Jesus is *inclusive*. The great good news of the inbreaking reign of God in Christ Jesus is for all people everywhere! For men. For women. For the young and for the not-so-young. For the rich and for the poor. For those who hunger and thirst. For the downtrodden and the forgotten. For tax collectors and victims of human trafficking. For sinners and outcasts.

Jesus loves every one of them. And loves every one of you! Christ's authority is *an authority of love*. When we consider the power of a worldly authority, we may be fearful of punishment. But just as, in the Capernaum synagogue, a demon was cast out by Jesus, your fear and mine are cast out by his love. The

authority of Jesus is rooted in love. The power of evil is no match for the power and the authority of this One whose redeeming love delivers and saves each and every one of us fallen human creatures.

Beloved, today—with eyes of faith—we see Jesus teaching. But the authority of Jesus lies not in the *act* of teaching. The authority of Jesus is in the identity of the teacher. The authority of Jesus is in the One who is himself the teaching, in the One who is himself the message. The authority of Jesus is in the God who comes to us incarnate, the God whose ways are higher than our ways.

There is no higher authority. The authority of Jesus Christ is far above the authority of every earthly empire. Far above every human authority.

Authority rests upon his shoulders. All authority in heaven and on earth is his.

How has knowing this changed your life? And how is knowing this *going* to change your life?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.