

Authority in word and action

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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I wonder what the gospel writer Mark meant, when he said that, “(Jesus) taught with authority, and not like the teachers of the Law of Moses”?

¹Authority.

Scholars say that the Greek word Mark uses here for “authority” is not power, like a Roman imperial soldier – that is power. The Authority here demonstrated by Jesus is something different. They are amazed by Jesus’ words. Then, a few verses later, after he casts out what is said to be an unclean spirit, witnesses again are amazed by authority Jesus embodies.

Have you ever had an experience of someone with authority? Maybe it is in the way they speak, or in the way they act. I have heard great radio interviewers express fear in lead-up to having Margaret Atwood as a guest. What is it about her? Certainly not her size or power. Perhaps her intellect or her wit.

Years ago I came to know a congregation member, Ed Goerz, who served as the executive director of Cornerstone, a large downtown men’s shelter in Oshawa. Speaking with him, there was something about him; he was gentle and compassionate, and greatly respected by the clients and staff. Faith played a big part in his understanding of homelessness. I visited the Cornerstone website and there found a quote from former Executive Director Ed Goerz, “Unless shelters are places of transition, they are part of the problem.”² Very wise words.

Perhaps *authority* is somehow interconnected with a sense of perspective – *what we are doing here and why*.

Maybe these are questions you and I should ask ourselves: What are we doing? Why? Collectively as a church called St. Andrew’s – Who are we? Why?

Did you know that we have a very succinct vision statement? Growing Spiritually... Building Community... Transforming Lives. Powerful words, but our leadership team realized recently that if we believe that, then we need to ground ourselves in that vision regularly. Like the ground under our feet holds us, supports us. We remember that authority originates from the

¹ Mark chapter 1, verse 22

² Cornerstone Shelter, Durham Region. <http://www.cornerstonedurham.com/about-us>

Source. Like our forebears in faith over the millennia, we hear and tell these stories of faith in fresh ways, and remember that who we are, and whose we are.

Could people sometimes experience authority in you? My hunch is that sometimes we do see the face of Jesus in one another. Whether it is something we do or say that just seems timely, so much so that people feel a sense of wonder even if just for a just a moment. Today's Gospel story begins with the authoritative teaching of Jesus, but the climax, the centrepiece of this story, is the authority he demonstrates over an unclean spirit.

It might have been literally about an exorcism, I don't know. I believe that there are many more things we don't know about than the things we know. But this story opens with a comparison of Jesus' authority to that of the respected religious leaders, the scribes. Scribes have power and respect within the Jewish faith, But Mark's story conveys a collective sense that Jesus embodies an authority they have not seen.

Jesus taught, *but then Jesus demonstrates the teaching*, with an action that inspires amazement in witnesses.³

I believe that something of that authority is vested in us, when we answer the call and learn the teaching, but, then we live the teachings of Jesus in our actions. I'm still just learning this for myself, perhaps you are too. We ground ourselves in our tradition, the faith stories, but also encourage one another within community to claim, to teach about and to demonstrate in our actions authority that is not forceful power but love and humility. A passerby stopping, sensing that they should take a moment, they see a man clutching a blanket along the sidewalk, almost invisible. But Christ sees him, and lets him know.

The father of a high school friend of mine was an alcoholic. There were tears, moments of anger, and years of grief. Years brought healing and sobriety for the dad, much of it he credited to Alcoholics Anonymous and his sponsor of many years who was always there, sometimes awakened in the night to listen and love. Part of his journey was to be a for sponsor others. He was not much of a religious guy, but in my estimation he had great authority in his compassion. He knew where he came from, but also why he was here.

³ Ofelia Ortega, "Theological Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration*.

You may wonder why I have photo of a Banksy mural on screen. When I was working in Bethlehem in the West Bank, I was shown a Banksy mural right on the separation wall. Banksy's real identity is quite mysterious, But the graffiti art tends to be witty and rather political. Images depicting a hole in the 30-foot concrete wall, looking out at a beautiful tropical scene. Another famous piece shows a masked man seemingly poised to throw a rock, but instead in his hand is a bouquet of flowers. Banksy somehow eludes the political authorities in order to create pieces that provoke thought, and here, to inspire hope in those for who need it.

Who are you, and why did your Creator put you here? Let us claim our authority, our call to love and care.