

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – January 31, 2021 – Who You Are
Psalm 111:1-10 and Mark 1:21-28

On the field of battle, the commander has reached a decision point. Should the battalion maintain their position? Or should they now push ahead and launch an assault in an effort to penetrate the defenses of their adversaries? The consequences of either decision are no less than life or death.

In the chaos of the moment, amid the roar of gunfire and the shouts of soldiers, the leader knows that he will be judged in keeping with the fate of his command. Soon, he makes his decision. They will be moving forward, strategically leaving their present post and laying claim to higher ground some 100 yards ahead. He signals to the soldiers who, with fear and trembling, follow his instructions.

While authority comes in many forms, it is always a combination of knowledge and expertise that is recognized by others. The soldiers trust their commander because they have trained with him, and because they believe in the system that resulted in his promotion. Therefore, when the decision point arrives, and the order is given, they do not hesitate to put their lives on the line in service of a common mission.

One becomes an authority in any field through training, or experience, or the power of personal persuasion. Oftentimes, it is a combination of each of these working in tandem to get others to act in a certain manner, or to defer to one's judgment, or to coalesce around a certain idea.

Authority is found in many different personality types. I think about a grandmother, telling stories of hardship, while children and grandchildren listen with rapt attention. She need not even raise her voice to make the point. Her family recognizes that her words are packed with wisdom. And her narrative, her story, is entirely authoritative.

In our second lesson this morning, we are challenged by this concept of authority. Who has it? Why do they have it? And is it being wielded justly? Here we learn about a man named Jesus from a tiny hamlet called Nazareth who effectively challenges the religious and political authorities of his day. He could not match their formal education, and he was not raised in an influential family. So it comes as a surprise when Jesus speaks but a few words, and grown men leave their old lives and follow him. And it is nothing less than astonishing when large crowds soon follow him wherever he goes.

Passages like these make me uncomfortable, and I think that this is at least part of the point. You see, there is a message here for people like me who have dedicated our lives to formal structures of authority. First college. Then seminary. Then, the established church. There is little to distinguish me from the scribes in this passage.

And now that I am a credentialed insider, I want to know by what authority Jesus says and does these things. Admittedly, I am not nearly as satisfied as I once was by the holes in his formal training. That short stint in the temple at Passover as an adolescent boy. And his full immersion baptism offered by his cousin in the wilderness. No matter how intelligent and promising Jesus may have been, and he certainly was both, this is hardly the resume that I have come to expect of a prospective minister in our denomination.

I am not suggesting that Jesus came to dismantle institutional religion. But I am arguing that he came to remind his followers that any authority that we receive as God's people is ultimately granted from on high. And that, if God extends the call, then God will also equip individuals for divine service in the kingdom.

Prior to the pandemic, I would often go to one of the local libraries here in Akron to read and write in preparation for my final doctoral project. I was surrounded by books. I was knee deep in research. And I was trying to get it right.

One day, two men came inside the library and sat at the table beside me. They were talking very loudly, and I was perturbed. Did they not know that this was a library? Did they not know that people were studying there? Could they not see my large pile books? My need for silence and concentration? Did they not notice how important my work was? Who did they think they were anyway?

Soon, their small talk came to an end and they began to focus on real task at hand, with the younger man serving as a mentor to the older man who wanted to learn how to effectively preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. I did not agree with much of what was said that day regarding the interpretation of the text at hand, but I also recognized that my context, and my training, and my expectations were different. And I was reminded that if God calls, then God will also equip individuals for divine service in the kingdom.

When Jesus taught and when he healed people, the scribes were often perturbed. Who did this guy think he was anyway? Did he not know that they were

the ones going about the business of their Father's house? Did he not know that he couldn't just walk into the synagogue without a big stack of books before claiming to be some authority?

Strikingly, it is not the scribes but the evil forces who immediately recognize Jesus' authentic spiritual power. They know who he is. They understand his purpose. And they are afraid that he will vanquish them. So, in an attempt to control him, they call him by name. Yet, Jesus knows them, as well, and he will not be easily controlled.

Friends, have you ever tried to control God? Have you ever hoped that Jesus might do your bidding for you? Do you believe that when you address the Lord in prayer, that God is obliged to provide all that you have asked for and then some? Or do you recognize that, on account of our petitions, it is actually we who are being changed more than anything else?

God knows who you are. Your every need. Your every breath. Your every desire. And God speaks to you through the authoritative revelation of Jesus Christ – the One who displayed his power in words that astonished and in deeds that have no equal here on earth.

For some mysterious reason, God chose to work in partnership with us. And we are commissioned to service with these words: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And, remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” May it be so. Amen.