

True Authority

Preached on The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Jan. 30, 2022
Text: Matt. 8: 1-13

This morning's Gospel opens just after Jesus has preached the memorable Sermon on the Mount. Matthew Chap. 7 ends with the crowds being "astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." (28-9) Who was this man who could speak with such authority?

Those who represent authority are usually backed up by a more "authoritative authority," so to speak. Police have the authority to pull us over, or even arrest us for good cause. But that authority does not issue from individual police officers, but from the laws governing us and the particular laws governing them. An individual does not have the authority to tell his neighbor where he can or can't build his garage, but the Town does. This authority rests on the prior establishment of by-laws that lay out the ground rules determining the extent of the Town's power to restrict property owners. That authority does not—in theory—rest on the whim of some official.

With respect to authority, the Jews paid heed to the teaching of the scribes, who occupied an important place in first-century Jewish society. Scribes were experts in the Law, and the people regarded their Scriptural interpretations as binding. Because of this, and because scribes took care of the scrolls on which the Bible was written, they held seats of honor in the synagogues. One had to be a scribe to sit on the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Jews, and the scribes also served as civil lawyers. In any case, they taught by citing the opinions of various rabbis on different matters, appealing not to their own authority, but to the authority of others.

Christ, on the other hand, appears as someone whose authority rests within him, not on prior authorities. He did not appeal to the teachings of various rabbis when he instructed the people. Rather, as Matthew Henry comments, Jesus taught "as one that knew the mind of God, and was commissioned to declare it." Jesus contrasted his understanding of the Scriptures with the understanding of the scribes; he expected others to see his teaching as superseding theirs. In fact, he taught with the authority of God Himself. The Greek word *exousia*, translated "authority" in the passage above is typically used in the Bible for God's own authority. The word can also be translated as "jurisdiction," "power," or "right." Jesus, being God, has final jurisdiction. His right to command is not dependent on some higher authority.

Jesus refused to act like a speculative moralist, rejecting the quagmire of much 1st Century moral casuistry. Rather, he set forth a vision of life in the Kingdom of God that stretches our moral imagination and undermines our complacency. We thought we knew what God required of us. No murder and no adultery, for example. But Jesus now

demands no anger and no lust. "You have heard it said," he begins, "but I say to you..." He warns of hell and commands that we love our enemies. He warns us not to trust our bank accounts or retirement plans, but to lay up treasures in heaven. He reminds us that we cannot add a day to our lives nor an inch to our height, but assures us that our heavenly Father will clothe us in more glory than the lilies of the field. He tells us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and promises that all these things will be added to us. We are instructed to judge a tree by its fruit, even as we shall be judged. We are to build our house upon a rock and not upon the sand, for the house on the rock stands, while the house on the sand falls.

Jesus has turned our world upside down. The ones we thought were blessed are now cursed, and the ones we saw as cursed are promised to be blessed. The radical nature of Jesus' ministry and teaching is on full display here—and it is all established upon his own authority. When Jesus teaches, he does not cite human authorities, enter into irrelevant debates, or pull his punches. And he will demonstrate that authority by healing the sick, casting our demons, staring down the religious authorities, and, most clearly, by forgiving sins. At the end of Matthew's gospel, he will announce that all authority in heaven and on earth has been granted him, and he will send his disciples out into the world as ambassadors of the Gospel.

All authority has been granted him. Not an authority dependent on popular vote, or skilled oratory, or even a constitution. His authority did not rest on a *claim* to be divine, as was the case for many pagan rulers. His authority rested, and rests, on *being* Divine. Any purported human authority finally bows to his and no other. Jesus appeals to no one else when he says "[e]veryone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock...(Matt. 7: 24) His words are ultimately authoritative because they come directly from God. He *is* the Rock we build on. He is the Rock that followed Israel through their 40 year sojourn (1 Cor. 10: 4). He is the Rock of Ages, undiminished by time, impervious to storm and flood.

The authority of Jesus will continue to be a prominent theme going forward in Matthew, and particularly in the three chapters that immediately follow the Sermon on the Mount. In our chapter, Jesus heals the leper, and then the servant of a centurion, the latter specifically recognizing Jesus' authority over illness: "for I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me" (8:9). Then in Chap. 9 Jesus declares his own authority over sin and forgiveness: "But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." (9:6). And finally in Chap. 10, he delegates his authority over the demonic realm to his disciples: "And he called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction" (10:1). First he teaches with authority (Chaps. 5-7); then he proves his authority. (Chaps.8-10)

Matthew is very intentional in his organization of the book, not just to make it easier to read, but to heighten its impact. It is one thing for him to tell us that Jesus had authority; it is another thing entirely to show how that authority was realized in his ministry. He is showing how all of those seemingly insurmountable powers of darkness in the world—the powers of

disease and sin and the demonic forces—are now coming under the authority of Jesus. All that went wrong in the garden is now being reversed under the jurisdiction of Christ.

Matthew tells us that the crowds were astonished at his teaching—*astonished*. They had never seen or heard anything like this. Every teacher they had ever heard cited other teachers as authorities. Their teachers hemmed and hawed, proposed and retracted, pitted one interpretation against another, and always left themselves room for qualification. They interpreted the law by investigating precedent and tradition. Their rulings were approximate and carefully hedged. Unlikely and ridiculous scenarios were debated; hairs were endlessly split; nothing was conclusive. And, of course, none of it ministered grace to its hearers. But now the crowd sees the scribes' authority really challenged. They have encountered someone with un-borrowed authority.

The centurion realized this. In Luke's telling of this encounter (Lk. 7: 1-10), the centurion loves Israel and has built the people a synagogue. He recognizes the sovereign Lord of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He has a true living faith and humility. He acknowledges his own inability to help himself and his own unworthiness. Yet he knows God is gracious and has jurisdiction over all. "I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." The very *words* of God possess unmatched power. "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host by the breath of his mouth," says the Psalmist (33: 6). The centurion's authority over a hundred men is a puny authority; yet it is very real. "I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes..." If this is the case with him, then how much more can the Lord of the universe accomplish?

Human authority is provisional. It lasts only as long as one's term of office, or one's successful maintenance of fear or propaganda, or one's ability to neutralize resistance. Even in countries standing for rule of law, laws thought to be solid can be circumvented by the crafty; institutions can be hollowed out if enough people cave to pressure. Common understandings thought to be rock-solid can be undermined through stoking anger and division. Coups can be successful if a minority is ruthless and well-organized and their opposition too fragmented. It is all about power, one of the chief idols of fallen humanity. Some people will do anything to maintain it, including lying, cheating, threatening, and murdering on a massive scale.

But God's power is a power under love. His authority is not about subjugation, but liberation. He has the authority to forgive and restore, to bind up and heal. Without God's good authority, there would be no Church, no salvation, no forgiveness of sins, no hope. It is the only sure place to stand. As the old hymn says, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." And its refrain says, "On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand." Make no mistake. Those who put their trust in princes and their borrowed authority will end up with nothing.

In the Name...