

One with Authority
Mark 1:21-28
January 31, 2021

On Monday, January 25, Governor Newsom lifted stay-at-home orders across the state of California. For over ten months now, the state and county orders have been controversial. They were issued with the intended purpose of saving lives. However, the side effects of the orders have included debilitating restaurants and many other businesses, fueling unemployment, loss of housing, health benefits, and more. Some have questioned the public health guidelines that are meant to protect the common good. Some have blatantly disobeyed, disrespecting authority.

Most of us tend to have trouble with authority in any form. It conveys regulation and control, appears to take away our freedom, and carries the weight of the establishment. It is even more annoying when we confront it in the chaos of a crisis. You can imagine what has been said, or what we ourselves have thought as we clashed with authority: “Who says so? What if I don’t? Who do you think you are? You can’t make me! What gives you the right?”

While authority can annoy us and make us defensive and adversarial, we need it. The question is not *whether* but *which*. Civil society could not exist without lines of authority for our governance. In fact, we have been seeing what happens when people believe they are somehow above authority or think that they can set it aside. We are in deeper trouble than we know when people determine for themselves what is lawful, what is moral, what they will do or not do.

Any problem with authority is in its use and application, which can become coercive and oppressive. Power and authority go together, but they are not the same. One does not necessarily follow the other. That’s what our scripture invites us to consider this morning.

The New Testament has a helpful distinction between power and authority. In the original Greek, authority means “official rights.” Power means “personal force.” The late Dr. Ernest Campbell said, “Authority is conferred, power is innate. Authority is extrinsic, power is intrinsic. Authority compels, power attracts. Authority is in the office, power is in the person.” When authority requires power to function, authority is always diminished.

Jesus had both power and authority. But his authority was not conferred by any human institution. He had no official rights, per se. The establishment did

not sanction him. He was considered a dangerous threat to the coveted privileges of status and rank.

On the other hand, by the very power of his presence Jesus inspired many people to faith conviction and exerted profound influence over others, even those who were sent to arrest and silence him with force. Jesus also manifested power in healing the sick and the demon-possessed. The people were accustomed to such power being in the hands of official experts. They were puzzled by this unknown, itinerant up-start teacher who was so powerful. They wondered, “By what authority are you doing these things?”

The power and authority were not so much in Jesus as through him. To be in Jesus’ presence was to be in the presence of God. The power in Jesus was the power of God. The truth lived out by Jesus was God’s truth. His authority was the revelation by God of what life is, what love is, and how God’s grace can bring us both life and love when we believe in God enough to live from them.

We need the power and authority in Christ because our world falters under the other kind. We need such power from God for days like these when we must cope with fear, devastation, upheaval, and loss. We need such power through Christ as we struggle with evil forces, seductions, temptations and the modern day demons that cripple us. We need divine power that brings us together, the power of love that makes us whole, that inspires us to serve others, that bonds us in hope and strength.

In our world many people seek another power – an aggressive power that intimidates, exploits, deceives, mutilates, and destroys. Jesus comes as a healing liberator in direct contrast to the death-dealing forces of evil and ruin in the world. Jesus comes to drive out those forces that diminish life and create space for life to flourish. As the gospel of John says of Jesus, “In him was life and the life was the light for all” (John 1:4). Jesus’ authority derives from the God who calls him, the God whom he embodies. With this authority, Jesus is empowered to lift up the downtrodden, to free the captives, and to build up the ruins.

What does this scripture mean for us? Who is the Author of our lives? Who or what is the most powerful influence upon our thoughts, words, and actions? There are many voices competing for our attention. We are deeply influenced by the media, our peers, and social media. Christians must carefully discern which are voices of God and which are not of God. We must carefully distinguish between unclean spirits and the Holy Spirit. We must filter what we allow to shape our own thoughts, opinions, and deeds.

Grounding our authority in our Christian faith is not necessarily a popular choice in today's culture. We often find ourselves outside the mainstream of society because our Christian values lead us in different directions. Like Jesus, we may find ourselves in conflict with others because we operate from a God-centered perspective.

There is also a danger that we become too smug in our faith life. We can become confident that we are so closely connected to Jesus that our lives, actions, and thoughts have the seamless consistency that Jesus did with God. We deceive ourselves into believing that our values and opinions are those of Jesus. We fail to start with Jesus, allowing him to be the Author of our lives.

Jesus gave two instructions to the unclean spirit: Be silent and come out of the man. These are two commands for us to follow as we strive to make Jesus the Author of our lives.

Be silent. Stop the ceaseless flow of competing voices in our hearts and minds so that we can be attentive to the one still small voice of God. In the silence we trust God to reveal the next steps in the divine drama God is composing through our lives.

The second command is to release those "unclean spirits" within. Let go of attitudes, resentments, and biases that are not of God. Like Jesus, when we are emptied of ourselves, we can be filled with the Spirit of God.

Listening to God and empty of self, we yield to the divine power of God, allowing God to mold and shape us after God's will. We are open slates ready to be inscribed by God as the Author of our lives. May we dare to be silent enough to listen to the Spirit and empty enough to allow the Spirit of God to guide our lives.

Master Potter, we are amazed at your creative ingenuity. You set in motion the gift of life. Your Spirit continues to create, fashioning each creature and human with uniqueness. We are sometimes chipped and scarred, but each is a holy vessel precious in your sight.

We acknowledge that we are flawed. We use our tongues to lash out in critique and withhold our praise. We are prone to take the easy road, avoiding sacrifices required by the costly path of discipleship. Forgive us, O God, and release us from those forces that diminish our life and the lives of others. Free us to faithfully follow in obedience to your word.

We pray for all those in public service who are tirelessly working on behalf of your people. Renew the strength of health care workers, teachers, and essential workers upon whom we depend.

We lift into your loving care those who have lost homes and are dealing with the challenges of rebuilding. Enfold those who have no shelter and live exposed to the elements of cold and rain. Encourage those who have lost employment and are fearful for the future.

May your compassionate presence abide with all who are ill, recovering from surgery or illness, coping with Covid-19 and its long-term effects. Hover close that they might know that they can lean upon your presence for renewed strength. Walk with all who traverse the valley of the shadow of death, comforting them in the midst of deep sorrow.

Invigorate your church, O God, that we might be a source of hope and a model of love that guides our nation into a state of peace with justice. Guide the leaders of this congregation as we seek to discern your desire for our life together. Be present in the midst of change, bringing fresh life and renewal of spirit.

We yield our lives, thoughts, actions, and words to your guidance, O God. We desire to abide by your will and to follow the way of Jesus. Empower us to do so with courage and heartfelt devotion. We pray in the name of Jesus, as he taught his disciples to pray, Our Father....

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