

“With Authority!”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28

On that Sabbath in Capernaum when Jesus taught in the synagogue, he did what all of us who preach secretly hope to be able to do: he wowed them! The good folks of Main Street Synagogue were clearly impressed! This new young rabbi was dynamic. He kept their attention! The text says that “they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

I remember as a child going with my parents to Madison Square Garden for a Billy Graham Crusade. Even at that age (I’m guessing junior high), I was impressed. He stood there with the Bible curled up in one hand, jabbing the air with his other, quoting the Bible right and left and making clear, solid points, and you couldn’t help thinking that here was someone who really knew what he was talking about. My minister at home wasn’t like that (and neither is yours). He didn’t raise his voice or hold the Bible up in the air. His preaching wasn’t anything like Billy Graham’s.

“What is this?” the people of Capernaum asked themselves. “A new teaching – with authority!”

Monday night last week in observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity there was a panel discussion involving nine clergy persons at the new Boces facility. Questions had been submitted beforehand that we were assigned, and then it was opened up to the audience to ask questions. As we all were taking our turns answering the questions I was conscious of the fact that besides the somewhat different answers being offered, there was also a difference in what we based our answers upon, the authority that we relied upon.

Those from the more hierarchical churches, Roman Catholic and Orthodox, spoke with the authority of the church. My friend and colleague Fr. Lioi from St. Mary’s, who was seated next to me, had printed off texts from papal encyclicals and apostolic letters from the council of Bishops. In the Roman Catholic understanding, authority comes from apostolic succession going back to St. Peter himself. In Catholic thought the Magisterium, consisting of the Pope and the Bishops, is the teaching authority of the church.

Clearly, we as Presbyterians have nothing comparable to the Magisterium. What do we have? We have the Book of Confessions full of statements of faith, or confessions, that have been hammered out by groups of people in various times and places. These confessions agree on many points but also disagree on some. The attitude of the Reformed tradition is that these confessions do have some authority, but it is limited. The authority is provisional, temporary and relative. We do not have a confession or statement of faith that we regard as ^[1] infallible, since all are the work of “limited, fallible, sinful human beings and churches.”

So on most of the questions that came up there was no official answer that I could give that would be true always and everywhere. I could say, for example, on the issue of abortion, that the pronouncements coming from the General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church over the years have consistently favored a pro-choice stance. But for us it is one of those ongoing issues. And there is a sense in which for us it is based upon the understandings and convictions of the majority.

On the other side of the spectrum were some of my colleagues from churches with no or almost no hierarchy. When these persons spoke they were more likely to quote scripture

verses to explain how they arrived at their positions on various subjects. Scripture as authority! Of course I think all Christian groups rely on Scripture. But how do we interpret Scripture? Although I did feel compelled to point out that evening that on the subject of evolution, the three different clergypersons who spoke each supported his position with reference to the first chapter of Genesis. One took a very literal interpretation, another said what I would have said, that Genesis was never intended to represent a scientific or historical account of creation, that it was poetry, and so on. And a third was somewhere in between. Three quite different viewpoints all using a particular passage of Scripture as a basis. (If more of us had spoken there would no doubt have been more interpretations based upon the same text.)

When I spoke and offered my answers to the questions, I was more conscious than I usually am that on most issues we, as Presbyterians, do not have definitive answers, at least not of the same sort as our Catholic brothers and sisters. We have no infallible encyclicals. We have our Book of Confessions, and we have pronouncements from General Assemblies (sometimes contradicting each other) and we also have so called “authoritative interpretations” on various subjects, none of them infallible. Nor, when it comes to quoting Scripture, are we as apt to find hard and fast answers that settle the question once and for all, as some of our more conservative brothers and sisters seem to do.

This question of speaking with authority is a relevant one, and I have to admit that whenever I read this text about how impressed everyone was with Jesus, how he spoke with authority, I find myself getting a little defensive about my own style of preaching. When the people in Capernaum say, “he speaks with authority, and not like the scribes,” I am painfully aware that in that comparison, I would come out looking much more like one of the scribes, who liked to quote other scribes and other authorities. They would say, “Well, Rabbi Zuckerman on this text says this, but Rabbi Goldstein on the other hand says this....” Jesus didn’t quote other authorities. He spoke with authority! But can we do that?

I think I have told before about a cartoon I used to have posted on my office door. A minister is saying to his congregation: “Federal disclosure laws compel me to say that I’m not really sure about any of this stuff.” That’s not it exactly, but it’s close.

And yet, I am keenly aware that what I and others of my ilk have to offer is not enough for many people who are looking for solid, unwavering, unambiguous answers to their questions. They will go elsewhere, to a church where the answers are more forthcoming. One person has expressed the appeal of some churches with such an approach this way: “In a relativist world where values constantly shift, join with us, set your confusion aside. We will tell you God’s will, what’s right and what’s wrong for you. No longer do you need to feel doubt and anxiety.”^[2]

I understand that appeal. I understand the hunger that people have for certainty, for answers, and I know how that hunger can be and, in my opinion, often is exploited. And I think that this hunger has a lot to do with the growth of many churches.

But then I remember what the Apostle Paul said, that “we know only in part and prophesy only in part...” and that “for now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face.” And I remember what the text from Deuteronomy for this morning where Moses, speaking of prophets, warns the people to heed the prophets, but he also warns the prophets that they speak words that are not from God, they will die.

I like the word that Barbara Brown Taylor uses in one of her books, the word “restraint,” which is something she advocates. But at the same time she acknowledges that it is not the ideal that many are looking for: “Most of us have been taught that we should abandon restraint in the preaching of God’s word. For plenty of us, the perfect preacher is someone who stands in the pulpit radiating confidence—someone so grounded in Holy Scripture, so guided by the Holy Spirit that flames seem to shoot from the mouth and every word reverberates with God’s own *Amen*. There is no doubt in this picture, no struggle for speech. Restraint would ruin it. Restraint would sound like cowardice, or stinginess. In a time of famine, one should open all the storehouses and bring out all the food, right? One should open all the faucets and let the

[3] healing waters flow.” I like her word “restraint,” and for better or worse, that is the ideal that I strive for. For I am not Jesus, nor do I speak with his authority.

Rather, I see myself as part of the faith community that seeks to wrestle with questions together. My role in that community is to go to the Scriptures week by week and to offer to the community the results of my study and my inquiries. And together, as a community, we try to discern the truth. I try to speak with *conviction*, but that is different from *certainty*.

Those who are looking for definitive answers and for certainty will probably find all of this less than satisfying. They will want to find someone who speaks with authority. But for those who are willing to be part of a community of pilgrims who together, along with the minister, seek to follow Christ and to understand his ways as fellow seekers, there is something kind of exciting and adventuresome about it. That is the kind of community I think we have here. Together we are fellow pilgrims and together we will seek and explore the mysteries of God.

[1]

Book of Confessions, p. xviii

[2]

Stress, Power and Ministry, John Harris, p. 39

[3]

When God is Silent, p. 85