

**Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany**

January 28, 2018

The Rev. Paul LeClair

Deuteronomy 18:15-20    Psalm 111    1 Corinthians 8:1-13    Mark 1:21-28

May the words I speak, be only yours, O Lord,  
And the words we hear, be only your message of love,  
so we may share that love with all whom we meet  
in the days to come. Amen

*When the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught.  
All were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority,  
and not as the scribes.*

“What was it about Jesus,” I wonder,  
“that brought about this epiphany for the people of Capernaum,  
that Jesus spoke with authority?”

~ ~ ~

Having spent most of last year in and out of hospital settings,  
Beth and I became aware of how in the medical field,  
there is a very structured hierarchy of authority when it comes to making decisions,  
prescribing medications, and giving (and obeying) instructions.

This is reinforced by the uniforms worn, the name badges displayed,  
and people’s job titles.

However, we also found that the persons who best demonstrated  
the ability to listen, to give practical advice, and actually minister to our needs,  
hands-on and face-to-face, didn’t necessarily fit into that structured hierarchy.  
It was not rare for a nurse to know better how to painlessly change a dressing

than a department head would. At times, we overheard a physician assistant making medical treatment recommendations to the clinic doctor.

And so, at times we came to recognize the people who took time to listen, and to advise, and treat with care, as being the ones who acted with authority, more than a superior who rushed in and out of the room, and whose mind appeared to be more on the next patient down the hall rather than on the one sitting in front of them.

~ ~ ~

A charitable foundation experienced an epiphany about authority when they began work among the mountain people of Nepal. As their team was touring a small village, they were impressed by a long concrete staircase leading up the mountain to a village perched on a ridge. The steps certainly made it easier for them to navigate the steep path. But they also noticed the well-worn track in the dirt alongside the steps. So, when they reached the top, they asked the villagers about the path. Their question was met with a chorus of nervous giggles.

The villagers explained that, a year before, a visitor had struggled trekking up the hill path to the village. The well-to-do and well-meaning traveler was concerned about the women carrying heavy jars of water on their heads and he vowed to do something to help them.

He arranged for the construction of the steps and made a great display of “presenting the steps” to the village after the steps were completed. Then he returned to his home.

When the women tried to use the steps, they suffered many injuries as they lost their balance and fell with their water jars.

You see, they were used to feeling their way up the dirt path in their bare feet, and not having to look down and risk spilling the water they were carrying. So, in time they bypassed the steps and created a new path, along the side of the concrete.

“What would have been a better solution?” the foundation’s team asked. The villagers laughed. “If he had built a well at the top of the hill, the women wouldn’t have to carry the water up the hill at all!”

The foundation team realized that it was not wise to “impose” programs from the top down. Any new projects would begin by listening to the true authorities; those the foundation was trying to help. With wisdom, from then on, the women of the village would be involved the foundation’s future projects.



As we attempt to respond to God’s call to ministry, we need to be aware of how our desire to help others sometimes can take on an air of arrogance. Because we’re more well-to-do, or went to a better school, or live in an upscale zip code, we might assume we know what’s best for those we have deemed to help.

That attitude is what Jesus’ authority is NOT about.

People who encounter Jesus, see in him, a very different kind of authority, one centered in empathy, compassion and respect.

Jesus’ authority inspires rather than enforces.

He sees his call to lead, as a sacred trust. It’s a great responsibility to serve others, by revealing the God who calls us to compassion and mercy, and for the sake of his kingdom of peace, not judgment and vengeance.

May we seek to possess the authority of the Gospel Jesus:  
to listen with the compassion of the heart, to stand with (not above) those in need,  
to join our hands with those who are struggling up life's mountain paths  
balancing their own water jars.



My son, Peter, and I have been reading the book,  
*Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife.*

In it, Dr. Eben Alexander tells how he was struck with a rare illness  
that caused his neocortex, the part of the brain that makes us humans,  
to shut down.

When we cease to have a working brain, we have no consciousness.

As Dr. Alexander describes it, "When you pull the plug, the TV goes dead."

His brain was dead for 7 days.

But in spite of this scientific knowledge. When Eben came out from his coma,  
he had vivid memories of afterlife experiences.

Memories an unconscious brain cannot possess.

When I decided to read the Dr. Alexander's book,

I expected the author's background as a neurosurgeon to be the authority  
that would lead to his incredible story being believable.

But as I got further into the book, it was the doctor's honesty and openness  
regarding his struggle to understand his experiences  
in the light of his medical knowledge, that rang true for me.

His personal testimony of how this struggle gave his faith new life,  
had validity, not so much because he was a doctor,

but because he simply was a man, like me, sincerely trying to make sense

of the confusing puzzle life had dropped into his lap.

These were things I could relate to.

They were similar to questions I've wrestled with. These were the words that had authenticity and that I recognized as having authority.



I believe that on that Sabbath in Capernaum, when Jesus spoke, the people didn't hear just another teacher who was passing along the time-revered opinions of past masters.

Instead of hearing what one great rabbi or another said about this issue or that, they heard a truth that touched their hearts.

They found that the truth is not a "what," an inheritance left over from the past. They experienced the truth as a "who," an epiphany of a living, breathing man whose face they recognized as the face of God in their midst.



Each Sunday, we pray for God's help, that we may be a Total Ministry congregation who brings Christ to the world by encouraging individuals to discover and use their spiritual gifts in the church and in the community.

How can we be so bold as to pray for this?

What gives us the authority to minister in the church and in the world?

Well, from our witness to each other, and by our shared experiences, we've come to believe that by the nature of our baptism, each of us is called, by God, to live out our own unique form of ministry.

We've learned that when it comes to regulating this building's heat, adjusting the outdoor lighting, and countless ways to keep our church beautiful, Dave Marshall speaks with authority.

Some of us have discovered we have a gift for making God's presence known through music.

Others have found that they can bring Christ's comfort to others by way of a prayer quilt, the warmth from a hand-knitted scarf, or by providing protection to little girls in far-away lands with lovingly sewn dresses.

Most of us find that the real work of ministry happens after we leave this building and when we serve the needs of others in our homes and workplaces.

The Holy Spirit has blessed each person in this parish with special gifts and empowers us, and gives us the authority, and urges us, to touch the hearts and lives of our family members, our friends and even total strangers whom we encounter each and every day.



So let us pray.

We bless you O Lord for your power and your might and for how you use your authority over all things for good.

And so, we turn to you, O Lord, at this time, for your guidance.

We trust you to reveal to us how we **can** do what is right.

Help us, to be like Jesus; to be ministers who build up what has been torn down, who bring healing to broken hearts and lives, and who love the lonely and those who have been rejected.

May we have the authority to do these things

because our intentions are pure and because our testimony is true.

Amen

Sources:

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