

## WITH AUTHORITY

Philippians 2:1-11

Matthew 21:23-32

A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham

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It begins as a question about authority ... but before long it stirs up a concern about power. There had been that raucous scene the day before when Jesus drove out the money changers, setting everything on edge. Now it is the next day, and Jesus is in the Temple again, this time teaching, and gathered around are those who see in this man something different. He teaches, they have said before, not like the chief priests or the scribes, but as one *with authority* (7:29, 8:9, 9:8, 10:1).

So, the chief priests and the elders of the people come to him as he is teaching and ask, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Where I come from the questions would be: who are your people... and what are your credentials? They are questions with an edge to them. Says one observer:

Because it’s hard for us to understand life in Jesus’ time, it’s also hard to understand just how [serious his challenge is to the temple leaders]. By forgiving sins, Jesus is blasting away at the ... members of the priestly class who have made a profitable business out of forgiveness. Should we be surprised that they respond by attacking Jesus? .... It’s no different today. Power always protects itself.<sup>1</sup>

So, they ask where he gets his authority, and Jesus answers with a question of his own, promising to answer their question if they will answer his. He asks them about the baptism of John – “Was John’s ministry from God, or was John just a strong personality who knew how to work a crowd?” And immediately, these leaders who had tried to trap Jesus in his own words realize the tables have been turned. There is no good answer they can give. If they say John is just a charismatic figure and no more, then the people who view John as one in the line of the great prophets will be incensed. If they say John had a divine commission, then the people will want to know why they, as keepers of the faith, have not followed John.<sup>2</sup> So, they balk, prompting Jesus to say that he won’t answer their question about authority. But he doesn’t let their strategic silence stand; instead he addresses them again, this time with a parable.<sup>3</sup>

The parable itself is a seemingly simple tale about two sons, whose father asked them to go to work in his vineyard. The first son declined to do as his father asked, but later had a change of heart and went to work. The second son was quick to agree to his father’s request, but ultimately failed to show in the vineyard. “What do you think?”

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<sup>1</sup> Gracia Grindal, “Says Who?” *Christian Century*, September 11-24, 2002, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1997, 240.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Wardlaw, in an unpublished paper on this text presented to the January 2008 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Louisville, Kentucky.

Jesus asked. “Which of the two sons did the will of his father?” And this time the response from the chief priests and elders is unhesitating: “the first,” they say. Jesus is also unhesitating: “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom ahead of you.” You haven’t believed John’s call to repentance, while they did, Jesus said. You’ve had time to change your minds, but you did not do so.

Now, if we want, we can engage in another round of “let’s bash the chief priests and the elders.” But Matthew likely recorded this exchange as a challenge to the early church, to keep *them* from self-congratulation and to remind them of the importance of *their* own practice of what they preached.

This parable still challenges the church in *our* time, too. We might do well to ask whom we resemble in this parable Jesus tells. Clearly one of the points the parable underscores for us is the importance of matching words with deeds, of making certain that what we *say* resonates with what we *do*. Another point is the importance of where we put our trust, of what kind of *authority* we hold to... and whose power it serves. *Real authority* resides in the resonance of word and deed. As a community shaped by Christ’s teaching and life, we would add also that words and deeds, speech and actions are meant to align themselves with the will and way of God, as made known to us in Jesus Christ. The authority that attracts us and ultimately holds our loyalty is *that* kind of authority, where words and deeds converge with ultimate goodness and grace.

The eminent American theologian Joseph Sittler once spoke of his grandparents, and he said this:

Authority is a force continuous with the whole nature of the person...possessing it. My grandmother had authority; my grandfather had power. I remember what my grandmother said, because I wanted to do it. I have no remembrance of what my grandfather said, except that I had to do it.<sup>4</sup>

Amid all the anxieties and uncertainties that attend us in these days, I confess that I long for someone like Joseph Sittler’s grandmother to come along and set a tone for us, to instill in us both hope and accountability, someone whose words and deeds coalesce around good and gracious expectations, so that we will want to respond as the good and gracious people we are meant to be.

The model of such authority for us, of course, is Jesus, the only One worthy of our full and unreserved allegiance. But that is not to say that we shouldn’t seek after those who pattern their lives after him, or that we shouldn’t try to live out such a pattern in our own lives. Our inability to live up to Christ’s standard is no excuse for not trying, or for relinquishing the search for leaders who try as well.

Where do we look for such authority? We know who possesses power, but authority is a different matter. I recall a poem by the Brooklyn-based poet and educator Taylor Mali that noted the lack of authoritative speech in our time:

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<sup>4</sup> Joseph Sittler, *Gravity and Grace*, as cited in the *Christian Century*, August 13-20, 1986, p. 717.

In case you hadn't realized,  
 it has somehow become uncool  
 to sound like you know what you're talking about (?)  
 or believe strongly in what you're, like, saying (?).  
 Invisible question marks and parenthetical 'you knows'  
 ... have been attaching themselves  
 to the ends of our sentences (?),  
 even when those sentences aren't, like, questions (?).

Declarative sentences, so called because they used to, like, you know,  
*declare things to be true*, OK,  
 as opposed to other things that are, like, totally, you know, not (?).  
 They've been infected by this tragically cool  
 and totally hip interrogative tone (?),  
 as if I'm saying,  
 'Don't think I'm a nerd just because I've, like, noticed this, OK,  
 I have nothing personally invested in my own opinions.  
 I'm just, like, inviting you to join me on the bandwagon of my own uncertainty  
 (?).'

What has happened to our conviction?  
 Where are the limbs out on which we once walked?  
 Have they been, like, chopped down with the rest of the rain forest?  
 You know?  
 Or do we have, like, nothing to say?  
 Has society just become so filled with these conflicting feelings of *nyeh*  
 that we've just gotten to the point where we're  
 the most aggressively inarticulate generation  
 to come along since, you know,  
 a long time ago?

So, I implore you, I entreat you,  
 and I challenge you to speak with conviction,  
 to say what you believe in a manner  
 that bespeaks the determination with which you believe it,  
 because contrary to the wisdom of the bumper sticker,  
 it is not enough these days simply to question authority.  
 You gotta speak with it, too.<sup>5</sup>

Ah, but it's not that simple. There are people out there, and we all know them,  
 who speak firmly and convincingly, but without anything resembling real truth or real

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<sup>5</sup> Taylor Mali, "Totally like whatever, you know?" *What learning leaves*, Newtown, CT: Hanover Press, 2002. There are multiple versions of this poem, and the one I heard Mali read and which I quote differs from the printed text in this volume.

authority. It's all staged, but because their words convey power, real people and families are getting hurt. We know it's not real authority, because of what is missing.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, we begin to see what such leaders would look like, indeed, what we ourselves should resemble. Paul urged the Philippians... and us:

Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus,  
 who, though he was in the form of God,  
 did not regard equality with God  
 as something to be exploited,  
 but emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a servant,  
 being born in human likeness.  
 And being found in human form,  
 he humbled himself  
 and became obedient to the point of death—  
 even death on a cross.<sup>6</sup>

Behind and beneath and all through the authority of Christ was a quality that is sorely lacking in so many would-be leaders today, whether in business or banking, factory or university, politics or piety: a simple *humility* that manifests itself in a willingness to give oneself up for a greater good. Among the faithful I would suggest that such humility is characterized, even as we hold passionately to what we believe, by a willingness to examine ourselves, to listen to other voices, and to be critically self-critical.

New Testament scholar Beth Johnson notes that Paul introduces this Christ-hymn in Philippians by saying, "Let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus" (2:5). "Paul envisions the life of the community being formed by the mind of Christ – by a spirit of humility and loving service to one another rather than competition and grasping for power and control."<sup>7</sup> If the church were to live in such a way, it would certainly change the way the world sees the church. In time, it might even rub off on the world.

Jeffrey Krames is the CEO of a publishing and literary agency that specializes in leadership, management, and other business-related works. Over the years he has profiled some of the best and most effective business leaders. A few years ago, Krames wrote about the leadership style of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, who became Pope Francis in March of 2012. Whatever your thoughts about the papacy, or about this particular pope's worldview, Krames makes the case that Francis "has shown the world a new way to lead. Not with bluster or bravado, but with humility and humanity."

Perhaps the single most surprising thing I discovered about Pope Francis [said Krames] is that he made a conscious decision to become humble. By his own

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<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:3-8

<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Johnson, "Commentary on Philippians 2:5-11,"

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1260](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1260), accessed September 22, 2014.

admission, humility was not something that came naturally to him. He is the first to admit that he is himself a sinner with an “authoritarian streak.” That is important, because it instills hope in other leaders and aspiring leaders that they, too, can at least learn to become a little more like this remarkably effective figure.

One of the hallmarks of any leader is how he or she leads by example. This is where Pope Francis shines [Krames argues]. He leads a simpler life than perhaps any of his predecessors, driving what he calls a “modest” car – a Ford Focus. Before he was Pope, he was known to take public transportation and lived in a small apartment in Buenos Aires. After he became Pope, he had the Papal throne removed from the Vatican and chose to live in a two-bedroom apartment rather than something far more opulent. Francis lives by a set of values that consistently places others before him, viewing his leadership role as a servant. “Let us never forget that authentic power is service,” [he] proclaimed ... during his Inaugural Mass.<sup>8</sup>

Have this mind among you, Paul said. A mind of humility and humanity and servanthood. Words that match with deeds. Such are marks of genuine authority. And when one encounters it, one knows. One knows.

And there is one final element of true authority, I believe. I found it in a wonderful rabbinic blessing that goes: “May your leaders be those broken by compassion.” How different our world would be if the first question we asked of our leaders was not for pedigree and credentials, but simply, “Where does your heart break?”<sup>9</sup>

In this world of discord and division, of cold certainties and calculated cruelty, we desperately need leaders with compassion, humility and humanity. In short, we need leaders with servant authority.

Of course, it is also true that we need to be a people worthy of such leaders.

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Krames, “The Humble Pulpit: Leadership Lessons from Pope Francis,” <http://changethis.com/manifesto/show/121.02.LeadWithHumility>, as sent to me via email from Drue Moore on September 25, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Goebel, in an online site, <http://onefamilyoutreach.com>.