

# Authority?

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Reading Mark 1: 21-28

*1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

I have spent the last few days sorting books. My father, who is moving with Anne, his wife, into a smaller apartment, is forced to weed through his marvelous collection of books. Some folks collect kitchen utensils; some folks have shops with every kind of power tool. Some have the finest computers with which to calculate abstruse mathematics. But my dad's tools have always been old books. A retired university professor, he has read almost all the books he owns, and he has grown attached to them. At the age of almost 85 he still envisions the next book he may **write**, and he views each book in his library as being a potential source of perspectives and quotations. So it isn't easy to decide what to give away and what to keep. Nonetheless he stepped into this hard task, with Lynn patiently boxing and labeling, and me asking the hard questions: "Will you ever open this one again?"

Over the course of a long writing career—we found at least twenty articles he has authored since 1957 and eight or ten books he has translated, edited or written, the biggest and most difficult book my father ever authored was entitled *The Theology of*

Ramanuja. Ramanuja was a Hindu saint and scholar in the Middle Ages, and my dad wrote a dense volume comparing his thought and approach with the theology of John Calvin. So you can imagine that the little shelf of volumes by and about Ramanuja--in Sanskrit, Tamil and in English-- was pretty much sacred space. Nothing went.

Among the books tucked onto that little shelf were a few by Sri Venketacharya, my father's tutor in India, one in a long line of gurus who are disciples of the Guru Ramanuja. In a light-hearted moment, I said to my father, "Now dad, if Venketacharya was your guru, and Ramanuja was his guru, then you truly are a student of Ramanuja.... My father, suddenly serious, said these words of the man he respected and loved: "He was never my guru." Then he paused, and continued thoughtfully: "I was never his disciple." He was saying two things: Never was Venketacharya his guru, and never was he Ramanuja's disciple, deep as his respect ran.

He didn't need to explain further. My father, an expert on Hinduism, alongside Christianity, and well able to teach courses on Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism or Islam, has only ever been one person's disciple, though he has studied with many: his one authoritative teacher, the measure of all his other beloved mentors, was and remains the man who showed up in a synagogue in the Galilean town of Capernaum, long ago. Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching remain authoritative. So it remains, now that he is 84, as it was when he was a young doctoral student doing research in India.

*Authority: They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."* Such was the response of those who saw Jesus in the synagogue that day, near the beginning of his ministry. Authority. They didn't just hear words that seemed true—they sensed authority. But what is authority? And what kind of authority was this?

The word authority comes from the same root word as the word *author*. Real authority is not about who is powerful or who is convincing, or who claims to be in charge. NO, real authority is something that compels a deep response, has deep roots

in the origins of everything, power rooted in truth, rooted in the Word of the One who is the creator of everything, the first Word. Authority is from the author of the Word, from which springs life itself; the first Movement, from which comes love and creativity and justice. Real authority comes from way down deep, at the very origin of things.

It is a big mistake to give too much authority to that which isn't connected to this deepest place. Oh, we give away authority all the time. We give authority to politicians, to jingoistic nationalists, even to doctors, to movie stars, for that matter. But the fact that we give folks power over us isn't real authority! Better to give authority to Ramanuja and his disciples, to the Buddha, or to Jain saints, to the Virgin Mary or to Muhammad, than to many of those we give power to all the time! All these have more substance than many of those whom we give power over us. Our world is full of would-be authorities, who don't come halfway to the knee-cap of these.

The waters of false authority run shallow and their truths rust out and their benevolence turns out to be self-serving. Some time or another, most of us give away authority over our decisions and faith, and often we buy into the rules of those who are authoritarian! It is one thing to learn from the wisdom of others, real wisdom—and it is quite another to give shallow people moral authority over us, make them our lords and saviors.

We live in a rudderless world, full of people anxious to run the show. So we need to be very prayerful, very open, but also very critical, about authority—we need to be sensitized to Truth where it is rooted in the ground of creation, Love where it comes from that deep place, justice only where it has integrity.

When Jesus showed up in that synagogue in Capernaum, long ago, the people somehow sensed his deep connection with a Truth that came right from the foundation of all things. People sensed his unity with the Maker, his centeredness in a deep Love. They sensed that he was being moved by a Spirit that came directly from God. There was something about his presence that was deeply compelling. There was something

about his healing that was not just a matter of quick cure, but rather restored things to their right order: relocated the dislocated; reconciled the alienated; restored the wronged. THAT kind of authority.

Now why focus on this question at all? This authority question? I mean, this is Schenectady New York in 2015, not Capernaum, Galilee in Zero-zero-thirty. And I am not here to suggest to you that we need to simply recite the name of Jesus over and over again. Sometimes we, especially we from evangelical backgrounds, get so focused on the Name of Jesus that we fail to listen, fail to observe, miss sensing what he is pointing us toward. We may get so caught up in the miracle that we fail to hear the lesson hiding in the healing. And I am not even suggesting that only Jesus can be our teacher. We need to be realistic about how this really works! Whatever name we give to this God-authoritative teaching, we can be connected to it through all kinds of great people. I asked my dad what he thought about this, since he is someone who has never succeeded in being disciple to any other contemporary person. He immediately began the list of the people who had been the most deeply influential in shaping him as a thinker and a human, even though he didn't consider himself disciple to any one of them. NO, he said, many people are able to have a deep connection with God through some sacred tradition, and Christians along with others may have a deep emotional connection with another teacher through whom they meet this Truth. There's nothing wrong with that.

And yet, still, there is something compelling in this plain poor man Jesus who showed up in a house of worship long ago, who began to draw people to him, with his message of love for the outcaste, and healing for the broken, sight to the blind and deliverance to the captive. Oftentimes, in the retelling of his stories through the centuries Jesus has become unrecognizable, a king on a throne with a sword of flame; an angry judge; an authoritarian dispenser of merciless judgment! A teacher who rejects all who do not bow low enough. But this is not the Jesus who showed up in Capernaum long ago.

The one we claim as having Authority was love made flesh. He came not to proclaim himself as ruler but to pronounce the restoration of a world in which the last would be first, and the first last. His greatness came in washing the feet of others, touching those considered untouchable, treating women and men with the same respect, insisting on the centrality of children and youth in God's love, insisting on that love even for his enemies.

When we stop for a few moments to break bread and share the cup in the memory of THIS Jesus, we take part in the great banquet to which he was calling all of humankind, not just church people, but all of broken humanity. This vision—of love restored, of human beings healed, of creation brought back to dignity and health — that's what compels us, that is what grabs hold of us, that is why we follow Jesus. That is the authority that sneaks up on us and claims us for its own. It has its roots in the dawn of creation and it is the end toward which the universe slowly bends. Authority? Yes. But not the authority of princes, not the power of fear! This is Love's power seeping up from the ground beneath our feet; a spirit of hope set loose in the sky; justice in the air we breathe; and friendship in the bread we share-- one beggar with another.