



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: February 8, 2009

The Astonishing Authority of Jesus - Part 2, Robert B. Culp

Mark 1:21-28

A funny thing happened to me on my way to bed last Saturday night, though actually it was not so funny in terms of my becoming quite sick! I am grateful for the many inquiries made on my behalf and the best wishes sent my way, and I am now on the mend. Though, with Joanna's situation and her giving birth yesterday morning, it has made for a most interesting week! And it's been a week when it has been a bit difficult for me to focus upon a brand new sermon.

I'm reminded of the new minister who was arrived in town and preached his first sermon about sharing God's love, for which he received accolades and much positive reinforcement at the door following the service. The Chairperson of the Pulpit Nominating Committee was very proud, and he took great pleasure in the very positive first impression. Next week same sermon understanding of the pressures in adjusting and moving in. Third week same sermon some surprise, but generally allowance was made for the big changes the minister and his family were going through. Fourth week same sermon. This time, there was some real grumbling afoot, and the PNC Chairman was instructed to meet with the minister to inquire about preaching the same sermon on love 4 weeks in a row. The minister replied, "I'll keep preaching it until you all get it."

As you learned through the "channeling" of Shannon last Sunday, I was a college student in the late 1960s and early 1970s, making me part of the generation that lived by the words, "Question Authority." In college, there were a lot of student protests against the Vietnam War, with sit-ins and teach-ins and takeovers of academic buildings even taking place on the quiet campus of Westminster College, and in which (you will be surprised) I participated. Quite the radical was I, with long hair attending a tiny college located in the middle of Amish country in western Pennsylvania in a community that had a single blinker light. But "Question Authority" was our watchword, along with the hermeneutics of suspicion and doubt.

"Authority" for us meant all that was oppressive or repressive in society: those persons and institutions that were in the business of maintaining their own power or promoting their own ideology. "Authority" meant those in charge of things who perpetuated all kinds of privileges, whether dealing with race or nationality, gender or class. "Authority" was what suppressed human life and spirit and joy, something that imprisoned rather than set free. I have to admit that we were pretty self-righteous in those days, but this questioning of authority served to shape the society in which we live today in profound ways. Because all of us, in one way or another, have become questioners of authority.

And yet, we who were told not to trust anyone over age 30 did have individuals in our lives whose voices were

authoritative for us. There were certain teachers or professors, trusted relatives and family friends, even some pastors, who gained our confidence and our respect. They were the ones who told us the truth, who somehow embodied truth, and who loved us while they did it.

I have a special memory of Dr. Norman Adams, who taught religion and philosophy at Westminster College. When you are beginning your college years, every teacher, and every professor is an authority figure, but for me, as for many of my classmates, Dr. Adams' teaching was authoritative – his words rang true, they resonated deep inside, for there was a connection between what he said and who he was. He didn't teach like the other teachers, but he taught at "as one having special authority." In his mid- 60's, he stood above the so-called "scribes" of the college's faculty and administration, as he captured our hearts and our imaginations, and made the world a little less intimidating or confusing for us.

Dr. Adams taught us to look past the surface of things into the world around us and in our own souls. He loved teaching us about the nature of religion, and he was unsparing in his critique of anything that sounded false or superficial or trite. He spoke out on the political issues of the day, always cutting through to the heart of the motivations of those who were in power, whether in Washington, DC or in the administrative Offices of Westminster College, often angering those who were in power. He participated in student demonstrations, sometimes speaking up when our voices became muted, sometimes counseling us when our voices became too strident ... but always believing in what was best in us and knowing how to bring it out. I remember him today as someone who opened doors for me that I would not have had the courage to walk through without his prompting.

My guess is that most of you in this room have had someone, perhaps several people, like Dr. Adams in your life: people whose teaching or counsel was authoritative for you because of who they were and how they cared about you. These are people who can give us a whole new understanding of ourselves, who can tell us the truth in such a way that new possibilities of thought and action open up before us. We trust them not only because of what they know, but also because we sense they have our best interests at heart, and what they say rings true.

When Jesus one day walked into the synagogue of Capernaum, the people there recognized his authority by the way he taught. We are not told the content of his teaching – Mark is always sketchy about details – but we can be sure it was a proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of God. Whatever he said, it was something people had never heard before from their usual authorities. And somehow, Jesus' teaching appears to have provoked both excitement and alarm.

But it wasn't just his words, that astounded the people; it was that he backed up his words with action. He restored the "possessed" man in the synagogue to sanity, liberating him from chaotic and uncontrollable forces that had taken over his life and were destroying his personality. Jesus didn't just talk about the kingdom of God, he demonstrated its liberating power. His announcement of the kingdom proclaimed his own mastery over all the forces that make human lives less than human. He would go through his ministry unmasking the lies that people tell each other to protect their own power, as well as the lies they tell themselves in order to resist any disturbances of the comfortable status quo.

Jesus' authority, though, is not just a display of power or a dispensation of wisdom from a high pulpit. Because his words and his actions are bound together as one – he is what he teaches, and he has concern for those he teaches. Jesus has the kind of authority that is not just about making decisions; rather, it is the kind of authority that compels decisions.

In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells the story of her own reluctant "giving into" the authority of Jesus Christ. Sometime in her late 20's, after her father's death of brain cancer and a breakup with her boyfriend, Lamott began a swift downward spiral into alcoholism and drug abuse. She was having some modest success

with her writing, but success was not enough to keep the demons at bay. When the panic arose, she'd drink a bottle of Scotch. She finally realized that she was being brought down by dark forces she was powerless to control, and she had thoughts of suicide.

One night when she happened to be temporarily sober after a traumatic event, as she was lying in bed, "shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take another sleeping pill," she became aware that someone else was in the room with her, somehow "hunkered down in the corner." After a while, she knew beyond any shadow of doubt that it was Jesus. "And I was appalled," she writes. "I thought about my life and my brilliant and hilarious progressive friends. I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'"

In the morning, Jesus was gone, but then he kept coming back, she said, disturbing the weird, unhealthy sort of peace she'd arrived at by means of alcohol and self-contempt. She realized she could do nothing else, but give up and give in. "I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.'" It was a turning point, a moment of decision. Eventually, she got rid of the alcohol, and all her pills, and her cocaine, and she entered into a new life.

You see, the authority of Jesus Christ is the authority to compel a decision, to place before us an offer that invites us into our best selves. It is the authority of one who confronts us with the truth in such a way that it commands our attention, and then calls us to obey. It is, beyond question, the authority of One who has nothing but our best interests at heart. For it is the authority of One who is able to liberate us from the things that would kill us, things even more insidious than alcohol or cocaine: such things as the demons of fear and self-loathing, of helpless passivity and resignation, of darkness and depression, and of the preference we all have for living with comfortable illusions rather than uncomfortable truth.

To such demons as these, Jesus says with authority "words that become enacted" as he utters them, "Be silent. Go away. Be gone."

Certainly, the world today is no less confusing than it was back when many of us were told to question authority. We still have lots of difficult decisions to make in life, but the truth is that once we have made in faith the decision to submit our lives to the authority and truth of Jesus Christ, all the other decisions become a bit easier. We'll never know exactly what to do in every situation, but we know that if we are submitting to the authority of Jesus, certain choices are clear.

Benny came to know this truth in a life-changing way. He was a poster child for an "at risk" kid in the 1950's. He was black, raised in poverty in a ghetto culture on the streets of Detroit and Boston, the product of a broken home, headed by a poorly-educated and very young single mother, who had no professional training or job skills. In fifth grade, despite his dreams of someday becoming a missionary doctor, Benny was at the bottom of his class and was labeled as the class dummy, and his older brother Curtis was doing no better. His mother, though, instituted a wondrous remedy after spending an entire night in prayer – only three TV shows during the entire week and two books every week which the boys were to read and report on in writing! Rather amazingly, Benny, the "class dummy," rose to the top of his class within a couple of years.

But Benny had a terrible temper – hitting others when he didn't get his way, coming close to being suspended from school, and seemingly always losing control, quickly and completely. He felt that he was a good boy inside and that eventually he could handle it. One day, though, when he was 14, Benny and a friend named Bob were listening to the radio, and Bob changed the channel while Benny was listening to a favorite song. Benny changed the channel back, and then Bob changed it again ... and something in Benny snapped. Filled with rage, he pulled

out a pocketknife, flicked open the blade, and lunged viciously at Bob's stomach. Incredibly, the point of the knife struck Bob's large belt buckle and the blade snapped off. Bob looked at Benny with surprise and hurt in his eyes, and Benny raced off, sputtering words, "I ... I ... I'm sorry."

He ran to his house and locked himself in the bathroom, squeezing his eyes shut, but still the images came – his lunging hand, the slashing knife, the belt buckle, the broken blade, Bob's shocked face. Benny realized that he could not control his temper by himself, that he needed help.

And so Benny began to pray: "Lord, please, you've got to help. Please take this temper away. You've promised in the Bible that if I ask anything in faith, you will do it. And I believe you can change me!" He slipped out of the bathroom, got a Bible, went back into the bathroom, and he turned to the Book of Proverbs. His eyes fell upon these words from God, and they spoke to him in as deep a way as possible: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." The words convicted Benny, but they also gave him hope. It was as if God was speaking directly to him, assuring Benny that he saw and knew everything about him, uncontrollable temper and all, and that God still loved him. And that because God was the One who had made him, God was the only One who could help change him ... and he would.

Benny read and prayed and wept for a long time in that bathroom that afternoon, and gradually he became filled with a genuine, unexplainable sense of peace. He stopped crying. His hands stopped shaking. The horrible images of what he had done faded slowly from his mind. And he knew God had answered his prayer. For four hours he had locked himself in that bathroom alone with God. But when he walked out, Benny knew that God had done something significant in his heart. God had changed him in an undeniable and palpable way.

Indeed! Benny heard an authoritative voice that day, the voice of the Lord our God, and he paid attention ... trusting the love that forgave him, the love that knew him, the love ushering him into a new tomorrow. And today, Benny, or as we know him – Dr. Ben Carson – is one of the foremost neurosurgeons in the world and the director of pediatric neurosurgery at Johns Hopkins. Praise God from whom all blessings flow!

Let us pray: O God, astonish us once again by the transforming power of your love and forgiving graces. Allow us to encounter you in personal and powerful ways, healing us from whatever may plague us, so that we may make decisions for compassion, for generosity, for honesty, for courage, and most of all for you. Empower us, we pray, to commit ourselves to live under a new teaching, a different kind of authority, and thereby live a more liberated life, with lots of open doors for us to walk through. In Jesus' name. Amen.