

The Rev. Seth Dietrich
January 28, 2024 - 4th Sunday after Epiphany

The Source of Authority

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one Lord and mother of us all. “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority.”

Who has authority in your life? Who do you grant power, acknowledge wisdom, offer allegiance? Amidst all the sources out there, all the opinion writers and podcasters, all the self-help gurus and spiritual figures, who do you trust as an authority? And how do you know whether to trust them? Do they have the right letters behind their name? Are they on your ideological team, one of the “good guys?” Do they have at least 4.6 star rating?

It’s no secret that our culture is in the midst of a massive crisis of authority. Every year we break new records for suspicion, for lack of trust. From the media to religious organizations to politicians to academics, it seems like new revelations of incompetence or malfeasance come out all the time. Personally, I don’t think humans are getting worse; I think we’re just getting better at catching people out.

Some have been following the story around fabricated science by the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, one of the nation’s foremost cancer treatment and research facilities. Apparently, this British scientist, working totally on his own in his free time, sort of for fun, went through hundreds of journal articles looking for fraud. He used these new tools from AI to examine whether the images in the papers had been doctored. And he found many, perhaps 58 total, in which the image has been stretched, obscured or spliced together in a way that suggests deliberate attempts to mislead readers.

This kind of revelation just further emphasizes the feeling so many of us walk with: Who can we give our trust? Who is a real authority? Maybe one of the reasons we often feel so exhausted in postmodern culture is that a part of our brain always has to be reserved for analyzing, “Is this real or is this fake? Where is this person coming from? What are their sources? Am I getting fooled?”

Maybe YOU are the only person you can trust. *Forbes* magazine recently proclaimed: “You are the Ultimate Authority on Your Life,” I think the article captures the spirit of the age. The author writes, “You have all you need inside of you. And arguably, when you really own this,

when you truly value your own judgment more than others...you'll thrive...You just don't need external guidance. Step into *your* power.”¹

Now some people really do need to hear this message. If your inner voice has been crushed by other voices in your life, an overbearing parent, an abusive spouse, a religious cult, you may need a reminder that you do have authentic inner resources to draw on. We can all use a reminder to trust our guts, our instincts, our reason as an important source of wisdom.

But you don't have all you need inside of you. At least I don't. I have some of what I need. But I very much need sources of authority outside of me. This is part of what it means to be involved in a church. We come here because we long for sources of power and wisdom, outside of us. Ancient texts, old hymns, time-tested prayers and rituals, other flesh and blood human beings of all generations.

And to be a Christian means to have this deep sense, sometimes hard to articulate, that Jesus Christ is the ultimate authority for my life. Now even saying that for many Episcopalians, can be hard. I get it. We worry that we'll sound too religious, too much like those crazy Christians, who seemingly walk around with blinders on to many other sources of truth. Episcopalians tend to be heavily invested in staying open, being generous and curious to all these different sources of authority from science to philosophy to other faith traditions. We want the freedom to sort things out for ourselves, and we are loathe to get pinned down.

Many of us have come out of highly restrictive spiritual environments, places where there was enormous pressure to think and believe in this very narrow way, that we are so suspicious of placing ultimate authority on any one thing or person. I remember 10 years ago I overheard a woman who was new to Christ Church. She had grown up in a fundamentalist church in the south and she was talking to another newcomer, someone who'd grown up “strict Catholic.” And I heard her lean over and say to the newcomer, “Honey, the best thing about the Episcopal Church is they will let you believe whatever the heck you want!” Which I guess technically is true. We don't really have belief police. Our doors are always wide open to everyone and we think God loves everyone no matter what.

But still. I challenge you. Try this statement on for yourself: “Jesus Christ is the ultimate authority in my life.” How does that feel? What comes up for you? Good? Bad? Weird?

In today's passage the gospel writer Mark proclaims. “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.” From this very first chapter of his gospel, Mark is telling us that a major part of his agenda in writing the gospel is to convince his readers that

¹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarayoungwang/2019/06/09/you-are-the-ultimate-authority-on-your-life-and-career-heres-how-to-own-it/?sh=32eb09157fd5>

Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ, has ultimate authority, ultimate power, ultimate influence. As we move through his gospel, Mark wants us to know that Jesus has more authority than all the religious teachers combined, more than all the priests you could fit in the Temple, more than all 20 legions of the Roman empire, more than the angels and archangels, more than the demons and unclean spirits.

In this story, Jesus just walks right into the synagogue on the holiest day of the week and without asking anyone, without any letters behind his name, he just begins to teach. And then a man possessed by an unclean spirit, some force of darkness comes into the synagogue. And we are not given a further explanation of his condition. Some swirling chaos within him, something fragmenting him into pieces. The unclean spirit, the demon, speaks in the plural: “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?”

Some of us have experience with what we might call personal demons. When I think of my own past battles with depression, I don’t think of unclean spirits. I see many less supernatural causes woven together: brain chemistry, childhood experiences, learned behaviors, genetic mechanisms - I could go on. But I’ve been with people in the midst of a really deep depression. And once I was with a loved one in the midst of a psychotic episode, someone fragmented in delusion and paranoia, just barely hanging on to reality. And in these situations, all these cool, clinical, rational explanations are pretty useless.

A few of us have had this experience. It’s utterly terrifying. To be with someone who is right in front of you and who is also 1000 miles away, at the bottom of a deep, dark well, they themselves, scared out of their minds. And at least for me, I don’t remember reaching for all the traditional sources of authority, I don’t remember thinking, I need to find the right medical journal article or podcaster or blogger. I don’t remember thinking, I really need to find a spiritual author. I should really call my bishop. I remember praying, “Jesus, help him. Jesus, save him. Jesus be with him.”

And unlike the story from Mark’s gospel in which Jesus casts out the spirit and the man is suddenly and miraculously healed, that did not happen. But I did see Christ in that psychiatric nurse who stayed past her shift to look out for him. I did see Christ in the therapist who worked with him to become more whole. I did see Christ in the parish community which accepted him, embraced him, gave him ways to serve.

Our culture longs for a larger authority that can meet the forces of chaos that crash into human life: addiction, loneliness, regret, violence, poverty, illness. For thousands of years people have been pointing to Jesus Christ as that authority. And I would say different people will point to different ways Jesus has ultimate authority in their life and for the world. Maybe for one person it is his nonviolent resistance, his power to forgive even from the cross. These people point to the way that non-violent love has transformed the world. And then for another person it is his

ministry of healing, beginning in the gospels but then brought forward over hundreds of generations by a Church which began the radical practice of setting up hospitals for the sick and dying as early as the 4th century. For another person, it is Christ's concern for the outcast, the vulnerable, the powerless. For another Jesus authority is more mystical and miraculous, deeply inward and personal, a whisper, a touch of the soul.

“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.” Can you proclaim Christ's ultimate authority for your life and for the world? If so, how? If so, why?