

A Teacher With Authority

January 29, 2012

Mark 1:21-28

Elon First Baptist Church has a television program on the local public access channel. The producer of that program had been a career noncommissioned army officer.

John is a no nonsense kind of guy, whom I have no trouble at all picturing as a drill sergeant ready to chew up and spit out recruits who even thought of looking cross-eyed at him.

John has a booming voice, and even when he is speaking to someone sitting right next to him you can hear him throughout the TV studio and even into the corridors of the building

I've gotten to know John pretty well over the years and I have learned several interesting things about him. He retired from the Army as an E-9, a Sergeant-Major. For you non-military types that is the highest enlisted rank one can obtain in the armed forces.

John served three tours in Vietnam, and now spends a lot of his time with an organization that works to get benefits for disabled veterans who are having struggles with Uncle Sam.

I've also learned that John is not only is the prototype picture of a drill sergeant, but he is also a very learned man. He is a university graduate - that "other Carolina" from down south.

I tease him when he comes in wearing his garnet sweatshirt with the big black letters "Carolina" across the front. I tell him he has the wrong color on for that name. I think he wears it just so I'll rag him about it.

John is extremely well-read. And I mention all this because John in many ways reminds me of Col. David Hackworth, the most highly decorated Vietnam war veteran.

You may have seen Col. Hackworth on some of the news talk shows, particularly back around the outbreak of the Gulf War, when he was arguing that we should NOT become involved in that war.

Col Hackworth's autobiography is entitled *About Face*. It is a massive volume, over 800 pages, but I highly recommend it to you. The stories in that book more than make up for the length.

Some allege Col. Hackworth provided the inspiration for the character played by Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*.

Even more fascinating is Col. Hackworth's emphasis in the book upon *teaching*: not only in the role it played in his rise from the enlisted ranks, but also in his seeing teaching as his most important role as a combat leader, training those under his charge to fight and more importantly to survive.

What comes to the forefront of the autobiography is the critical importance of authority in teaching. In Hackworth's case, authority derived not from established rules and procedures – it was *personal* authority.

Authority gained through the harrowing experience of enduring and winning in combat. Authority that derived from his self-identity as a warrior rather than with the institution that first rewarded and then rejected him.

That emphasis on personal authority sheds light on Mark's introduction of Jesus as teacher: "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one who having authority, and not as the scribes" (v. 22).

The teaching pronounced by Jesus astonished those who heard it. That astonishment traces less to content, and more to the personal aura of authority.

Now you might get the impression from Mark's account that this was Jesus' first day in Capernaum, but the other gospels would have us understand that Jesus had been teaching in the city for several weeks, using Capernaum as His "base of operation," so to speak.

As a result of His ministry among them the entire city of Capernaum was transformed by the power of Christ.

In the normal style of teaching in Jesus' day, a scribe or rabbi presented a case based on scripture and traditional interpretations. If the subject was Sabbath, the teacher referred to scripture related to Sabbath and citations of some previous rabbi's position supporting his view. If you could claim both law and precedent, you were teaching.

Jesus, however, proceeds otherwise. He invokes a different "authority" beyond what others have said or taught in times past. Jesus teaches as one whose authority resides in himself, in his own identity. Matthew's Gospel provides a clear illustration of this contrasting style in what has come to be known as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

*You have heard that our ancestors were told, you must not murder.
But I say, if you are even angry with someone you are subject to judgment.
You have heard the law that says "love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.*

And Jesus goes through a whole list of commandments saying, “You have heard.....but I say...”

“You have heard” no longer suffices in the light of Jesus’ authority, even when what they have heard is scripture itself. Jesus’ authority is vested in *himself*: “But I say.”

The decision to accept or reject Jesus’ teaching is not what you think about the texts and traditions he cited or ignored, but in what you think about Jesus.

And there is a difference. The teachings and authority of Jesus cannot be measured solely by how they conform to expectations related in scripture or to Israel’s developing expectations of the Messiah. Faith depends, in the final analysis, on a decision made about the *person* of Jesus.

Biblical scholars say all of the blessings pronounced by Jesus in the New Testament have Old Testament precedents with only one exception: “Blessed is the one who takes no offense at *me*.” The *person* of Jesus is the crux of faith’s decision.

In the Gospels, accepting Jesus’ teaching involves an acceptance of Jesus’ *authority*. That helps explain why Christian discipleship involves a commitment of trust in the person of Jesus beyond mere assent to this doctrine or that theory of biblical inspiration.

And to make such a commitment, you have to decide about Christ’s authority, an authority borne out in Mark’s story, not simply by his words but his actions.

The story of the exorcism that follows immediately after the astonishment at his teaching is not coincidental. Authority relates to power – and the power of Jesus’ words finds its equal in the power of Jesus’ actions.

Now let’s imagine what was going on in Capernaum. Jesus comes in and sets up shop. He is speaking and acting with divine authority. This, no doubt, got the demons in the city of Capernaum upset. After all, they had Capernaum right where they wanted it.

They no doubt had people whose lives were falling apart because of all sorts of what we would today call un-Christ-like behavior. Yes, they had things under control . . . Until Jesus started taking over Capernaum.

So in order to address this crisis, they probably called a demon’s meeting to discuss what they should do. Perhaps their discussion included thoughts like, “Let’s just run Him off.” “Yeah, let’s see if we can scare Him and get Him to leave us alone.”

But I’m sure one of the older, wiser, and more level headed demons probably replied by saying something like, “Brothers, this is no ordinary prophet we’re dealing with here. We know who He is! He is the Holy One of God!

No, we have no authority over Him and we will not be able to intimidate Him or scare Him. I'm afraid the only thing we can do is ask Him to leave us alone."

This evidently made sense to everybody, so they elected a representative from among them (no doubt one of the demons who was absent from the meeting) and sent him to the synagogue to ask Jesus to leave. This is what we read about here.

But Jesus would have none of it. His reply to the demon's request was straight to the point, "Shut up! Come out of that man!" Immediately, the Bible tells us, the demon left the man.

And not only was that demon dealt with, but Mark tells us in verse 34, that before the day was over, "Jesus drove out many demons." When Jesus takes over, Satan's kingdom is shaken up.

Ironically, the demonstration of Jesus' authority in exorcism elicits the exact same response as does his teaching: The people witnessing this were all amazed and they kept asking, "What is this? What sort of new *teaching*? It has such authority!"

Those crowded into the synagogue at Capernaum recognized Jesus exercised authority in the *person* of the teacher rather than simply his sources.

Did they follow that authority in their lives? Did they all become followers of the Christ? On that, the Gospel remains silent. Mark doesn't give us that information.

But I think we would all agree that it is one thing to see and recognize authority. It is quite another to heed and follow it.

And that throws the focus directly on us – on you and me. How do others see Christ's authority at work in us? Do persons see the authority of our faith merely in the words we pronounce and the creeds we declare and the denominational trappings we carry – or is our authority, like that of Christ, rooted in our identity and experience?

To go back to the example of David Hackworth: would people instinctively follow our example of Christian faith because they *know* the faith of which we speak is part and parcel of who we are and what we do?

Or to put it another way: if their lives depended on having a faith that was real and vital versus one that was peripheral and optional – would they follow us, convinced we are authorities for such faith, or would they seek others?

Now, you might think that's an unfair question. No one possesses a corner on faith's market. And yet: doesn't the faith of some persons seem so natural, so much a part of their whole being, that it would be difficult to conceive of that individual without it?

Such a faith is authoritative: not because it is pushy or easily verbalized, not even because it claims to have all the answers. Such a faith is authoritative because it is true to experience.

It's not that Jesus ignored scripture or his Jewish tradition for authority. It's that, because of the integrity of his faith, Jesus moved those teachings from past wisdom into present vocation.

“You have heard it said . . . but I say..” Authority comes from walking the talk, from faith whose witness is not only what scripture confesses, but also what our lives embody.

I have often spoken of The Salvation Army and of my experiences with them as I spent over seven years on the staff of the unit here. I have to be careful when I talk about The Salvation Army because it would be so easy to go overboard with praise for that outstanding organization and its incredibly dedicated officers and soldiers.

But I do want to share something with you that I believe has a direct bearing on what I have been talking about this morning.

Many, maybe most, people have a general idea about what The Salvation Army does, but unless you have seen it up close and personal, as we say, you can't fully imagine and appreciate the incredible dedication these people have to their mission of “heart to God, hand to man.”

And I can speak about them since I was not a commissioned Army officer but rather a professional minister on staff.

But of course I was often in worship services and meetings of all types with the officers and soldiers. And I must add that, even though their worship style is a good bit different from what I am used to and prefer, never was I ever the least bit uncomfortable in one of their services. There really is a beautiful spirit.

But the point I want to make today is that so many times as I would sit there among them, it struck me that as often as I have heard Mark's story, as well as I know it and as many times as I have preached on it, those meetings and services brought me into in the presence of men and women who bore the authority of that text because they *lived* it.

Those of us here have nice homes, most of us probably own them, many probably have garages or storage areas full of our stuff, and most of us at some point in life have had good incomes and at least a number of our wants.

These Salvation Army people I'm talking about work for salaries that would be an insult to most folks. They live in Army-provided quarters that are often too small, their lives usually are not their own – and I could go on and on, but I'll stop.

But when I now think of what it might mean to teach and live as one with authority – my thoughts turn to those Salvation Army officers. They walk the talk. They live the faith. It's not just Bible verses and church traditions. It's not just social services.

Faith recognizes that authority derives from life and word, action and trust, woven in a seamless whole by the grace of God

In the State of the Union address this past week, we heard some interesting things. These are things that the President needs to say, and we pray for him, and for our country. There are no guarantees, of course, but we hope that things will get better and stay good and peaceful.

But when Jesus speaks to us, through God's Word, there is much more authority. Jesus doesn't say to you, "I hope you go to heaven someday." He says, "Because of me, you will go to heaven someday."

Jesus doesn't say to you, "God might forgive you of your sin." Jesus says to you, "Because of me, your sins are forgiven." Do you see the authority? The Gospel is a sure thing – the words of God himself, the words of Christ – the only sure thing we have in this unstable world

Christ taught among us with such authority. So may we teach: as those whose faith is inseparable from our conduct, from our values, from all that we do and all that we are.