

## AUTHORITY

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Mark 1:21-28

On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy attacked the United States at Pearl Harbor. The following day, the U.S. announced its formal entry into World War II. That war ended four years later, when, on September 2, 1945, the Japanese signed articles of surrender on board the USS Missouri. In those four years of conflict, 405,000 American servicemen and women lost their lives. We didn't believe it could get any worse. It has. In just the past year, that many lives, and more, have been lost to the COVID-19 virus. More Americans have died from this virus than died in World War II.

On Tuesday of this week, at exactly 4:30 p.m., our church joined with houses of faith across the country tolling our bells—one ring for each 1000 Americans lost to the virus. We rang our bells 400 times. It took about 43 minutes. We did this as part of a larger memorial—the first nation-wide recognition of these deaths.

Why did First Presbyterian Church ring the bells? Because we have the authority to do so. It is within our purview—caring for the living as well as the dead. That is what we do.

As I stood out by the street as the bells tolled, I watched the cars go by and I don't know if anyone noticed or even understood why the bells were ringing. But it doesn't matter. This was our witness to those lost lives. It was our prayer. It was our authority.

There are different types of authority. One is the authority of power and leadership. We see this in the authority of government, the authority of constitutions and laws. Governments wield their authority because the people allow them to have it. The people can also withdraw this authority. As Abraham Lincoln stated in 1856, "Our government rests in public opinion." As I speak right now, there are protests taking place across Russia challenging the authority of that government.

Authority—to be effective—must possess a legitimacy. Without legitimacy, authority is not more than force.

Beyond the realm of government, there is a less-structured authority that exists between people. This authority is normally earned by one's actions or achievements, education and accomplishments. For example, I could call myself a race car driver, but until I go out on to a track and win a race, I'm just a tailgater. I lack authority.

In our reading for today from the Gospel of Mark, the matter of Jesus' authority is front and center. As Christians today, we understand and willingly accept Jesus' authority. But imagine being those people in Galilee when Jesus first came on the scene. They had no idea who he was or what he represented. He had no authority with them.

In the Gospel of Mark, the first time we meet Jesus is when he is baptized by John. As Jesus emerges from the river where John has baptized him we are told, *the heavens [were] torn apart and the Spirit [descended] on him like a dove*. A voice from heaven declared, *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*. Jesus is sent into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. After that, he goes to Galilee to proclaim God's *good news*. It is there that Jesus begins calling his followers.

With his newly designated entourage, Jesus goes to the town of Capernaum. This will become his base of operations. When the Sabbath arrives, Jesus enters the synagogue at Capernaum and begins to teach. He does what the scribes normally do—teaching and interpreting the scripture. But for some reason, his teaching was different than what the people were accustomed to. Mark tells us that the people were *astounded at his teaching*. Unlike the scribes, Jesus taught with *authority*.

We don't know exactly what it means for Jesus to teach with authority. Scholars are, however, familiar with the teaching style of the scribes. The scribes were educated men who would present a passage of scripture—such as a reading from Isaiah. Then, to interpret the passage, they would cite the writings of the great rabbis—"Rabbi such-and-such says this; Rabbi such-and-such says this." Scribes served more as dispensers of information and less as interpreters of the scripture. They did not teach with their own authority but leaned on the authority of others.

Jesus was different. He appears to have taught with his own words and understanding. The people declared that he taught *with authority*.

But that is not all that happens that day. While Jesus is in the synagogue at Capernaum, there was also a man present who was possessed with an *unclean spirit*. The presence of Jesus compels the spirit to cry 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*. Jesus commands the spirit, *Be silent, and come out of him*. With much shouting and convulsing, the spirit leaves the man. Again, the people are amazed, and they ask, *What is this? A new teaching—with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him*. Immediately, word of Jesus begins to spread throughout the region.

The authority that Jesus exhibits is not the authority of force, and neither is it the authority of law and government. We already know from this gospel that Jesus has the authority of God. But then, a lot of people have claimed to have God's authority, and they are the ones who usually start cults. It is not enough for Jesus

to simply claim to carry God's authority; he must demonstrate God's authority. And he does this. He does it by teaching and healing, by preaching, by performing deeds of power. He establishes that his claims are not empty. He engages in a ministry of teaching God's kingdom and performing acts of compassion. What we identify as miracles are also authentic expressions of God's authority. As followers of Christ, we can perform miracles through our own quiet expressions of God's authority. Sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, comforting the lost, ringing the bells to honor the dead—these are act of authority.

Late this week, I was saddened to learn of the death a personal hero—the death of the great baseball player Hank Aaron. Hank Aaron and I share the same hometown of Mobile, Alabama. In 1974, Aaron broke Babe Ruth's home run record by hammering in home run number 715.

Aaron had a long and distinguished career in baseball with numerous awards and records, the Hall of Fame, and more. I remember watching that game on TV when he broke Ruth's record. I believe the whole town was watching. At school, it was all anyone talked about. Sadly, however, despite his great accomplishment, as an African American Aaron was continually subjected to mountains of hate mail and innumerable death threats. But, despite his accomplishments on the diamond, Aaron was not the sort to draw attention to himself. A New York Times headline this week described Aaron as leading "A Quiet Life of Home Runs." When he retired from baseball, Hank Aaron used his authority to fight racial injustice, to cast out the unclean spirits of hatred.

This morning, we are ordaining and installing church officers. These people have been called to serve our church in roles of leadership. Their leadership is not rooted in force, but on the quiet authority of Christ. The officers are called to lead through service. Their authority comes from those who have held office before them. According to our church's Book of Order, their lives "should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel in the church and in the world." In other words, they should lead lives of authority.

I would like to end with one last story of authority. On Wednesday of this week, Joseph R. Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States. The day before his inauguration, Mr. Biden delivered a farewell speech in his home state of Delaware. In this speech, he talked about his son Beau who had died in 2015 of brain cancer. The father's love for his lost son was evident in his tears.

The next day, Wednesday, the day of the inauguration, Patricia Talorico, a writer for a Delaware newspaper, decided to visit the grave of Beau Biden at the cemetery of Saint Joseph Catholic Church<sup>1</sup> in Wilmington.<sup>2</sup> She writes that she had

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<sup>1</sup> St. Joseph on the Brandywine Catholic Church

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.delawareonline.com/story/news/2021/01/20/why-took-photo-beau-bidens-grave-going-viral-delaware-president-inauguration/4233905001/>

crossed paths with Beau Biden several times over the years, and the emotional speech given by his father the day before reminded her of a loved one she had recently lost. She wanted to stop by and offer a prayer.

When Talorico arrived at the cemetery, she was surprised to see that someone was already there—a man in a blue uniform was kneeling by the grave with his head bowed, hands clasped. Talorico chose not to disturb the man so she remained in her car and listened to the president's inauguration speech on the radio. The man did not move for the entire time she was there. She writes that the journalist in her wanted desperately to interview this man, but out of her respect for him and for the deceased she refrained and left.

We know nothing about who this man is. He is anonymous. I do not know what his faith might be, or if he even claims to have a faith. I assume he does. But as I've read that story so many times, I can only view this man's actions as those of Christian authority—performing a quiet act to honor the dead. While the attention of the world was focused on the father, this man in uniform chose to kneel at the grave of the son. Except for the reporter being present, no one would have known about this man. His quiet prayer for the dead exemplifies Christian authority by its compassion and reverence.

As Christians, our role in this world is to demonstrate Christian authority—not the authority of power, but an authority rooted in love—in care for neighbor, in prayer, in the honoring of this creation, in casting out the unclean spirits of injustice, poverty and hatred.

Let us choose to humble ourselves and set aside any hunger for power. Let us instead strive to serve our God with authority.