

“With Authority”
Deut 18:15-20; Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28; 1 Cor 8:1-13
A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
at Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
January 29, 2012

Before I read today’s epistle lesson, I’d like to draw your attention to the Greek word for authority: *exousia* (ἐξουσία). It’s used twice in the story you just heard. The crowds recognize that Jesus teaches as one with authority (unlike the scribes, who occupy *positions* of authority, but do not teach “with authority” according to the text). When Jesus commands an evil spirit to come out of the man in the synagogue, his action is a kind of teaching – again, *with authority*. *With power*, you might also say. In our epistle reading the word *exousia* is used again, in verse 9. There it’s translated “liberty” or “freedom.” Here Paul is the one teaching – with authority, I’d say, though his is certainly different than Christ’s. Paul is trying to help the church understand its *exousia* (its authority, its power, its freedom) *in Christ*, especially as the Corinthians face particular problems – *new issues* in their life together, things Jesus had said nothing about (at least, nothing anyone remembered or had written down). Here is what Paul says in First Corinthians Chapter 8.

*Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him. Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this **liberty** of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church. **Thanks be to God.**

A few years ago poetry slam champion Taylor Mali made a playful exploration of authoritative speech. He said:

In case you hadn't realized,
it has somehow become uncool to sound like you know what you're talking about (?)
or believe strongly in what you're, like, saying (?).
Invisible question marks and parenthetical 'ya knows' and 'ya know what I'm
sayings' have been attaching themselves to the ends of our sentences (?)
even when those sentences aren't, like, questions (?).

Declarative sentences, so called because they used to, like, you know,
declare things to be true, OK,
as opposed to other things that are, like, totally, you know, not (?).
They've been infected by this tragically cool and totally hip interrogative tone (?),
as if I'm saying, 'Don't think I'm a nerd just because I've, like, noticed this, OK,
I have nothing personally invested in my own opinions.
I'm just, like, inviting you to join me on the bandwagon of my own uncertainty (?).'

What has happened to our conviction?
Where are the limbs out on which we once walked?
Have they been, like, chopped down with the rest of the rain forest? You know?
Or do we have, like, nothing to say?
Has society just become so filled with these conflicting feelings of *nyeh*
that we've just gotten to the point where we're
the most aggressively inarticulate generation to come along since, you know,
a long time ago.

So I implore you, I entreat you, and I challenge you to speak with conviction,
to say what you believe in a manner
that bespeaks the determination with which you believe it,
because contrary to the wisdom of the bumper sticker,
it is not enough these days to simply question authority.
You gotta speak with it, too.¹

Mali's poem made me laugh, somewhat self-consciously – aware that the invisible question marks of which Mali speaks find their way to the ends of *my* sentences at times – an indication of uncertainty or insecurity or something tragically cool; I'm not sure which.

I heard an interview with actor Tina Fey recently. She was talking about the same thing in relation to the rules of improv – the rule about making statements, instead of asking questions. Say a problem has surfaced in the scene you and some friends are improvising; you want to be part of the solution to that problem. When you ask a

¹ Totally like whatever, you know? – by Taylor Mali
http://vimeo.com/3829682?utm_source=thedjlist.com&utm_medium=thedjlist.com_link&utm_content=dj_profile_link&utm_campaign=APPLICATIONS

question (Who are you? What's in that box?) it puts the pressure on other actors in the scene, because now they have to answer the question you've raised. It's more helpful to *make a statement*. Fey says this rule applies to women, too: speak in statements instead of apologetic questions. No one wants to go to the doctor who says, "I'm going to be your surgeon? I'm here to talk to you about your procedure?"²

Nice example, I thought, because yes, when we are feeling threatened, especially – when we are sick or worried or at risk – the bandwagon of uncertainty is not one we want to join. We want doctors and lawyers, teachers and leaders who speak with conviction . . . who have the answers . . . who take the pressure *off of us*. It's why the urge toward fundamentalism is so attractive right now, with so much of the *world* feeling stressed and disoriented. There is a desperate yearning for someone to solve the problems . . . to say with clarity *this is the truth* . . . to provide *with authority* the direction and protection and order we need.³ Israel knew that yearning back when Moses was appointing priests and predicting prophets. The people knew that yearning when Christ took center stage in the synagogue and Paul was writing his letters. Many people know that yearning today – the yearning for direction, protection, and order we can trust.

As some of you know, I've started working with a coach – someone who will help me both to make statements *and* to ask questions (the good and productive kinds of questions) – to become, in general, a better, more adaptive pastor. Last week my coach asked me to watch a lecture on "Leadership, Adaptability, and Thriving." It was given by Ronald Heifetz of the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard.⁴ Heifetz talked about the way that structures of authority develop naturally out of the need people have for those three things: direction, protection and order. Actually, Heifetz started not with people, but with animals. He described how a group of animals will wake up hungry and in need, and they'll look to the alpha female chimpanzee or the silverback gorilla (the one who is older, with more experience and know-how). They will keep an eye on that alpha female or that silverback gorilla and follow when she or he is ready to go. The one with authority provides direction. Say they come across a leopard. They're in danger. Again, they look to their leader. She decides what to do. Run . . . or stay. They order their lives in response to their leader, too. Where will they sleep? Near the silverback, or on the periphery? When conflict breaks out, the silverback will intervene. When behavioral norms are violated, the alpha female will provide correction. Authority structures like this can provide stability for social groups – for *years* sometimes, when things are peaceful. But what happens when a new problem arises? Say, a hunter comes with a gun. The silverback knows what to do about a leopard, not a hunter. His identity has been shaped around knowing what to do. But there's a new moment now, a challenge he knows nothing about. All eyes are turned to him. In the past, he has always known what to do. Now he acts like he *still* knows what to do. Then we're in trouble, says Heifetz, because the group has invested all its intelligence in this structure of authority, but the system no longer has the know-how. The system only works when the

² Tina Fey, *Bossypants*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2011, 84-85.

³ <http://ondemand.duke.edu/video/19666/ronald-a-heifetz-leadership-ad>

⁴ <http://ondemand.duke.edu/video/19666/ronald-a-heifetz-leadership-ad>

individuals in authority *can solve the problems* at hand – when their speech and actions in response to those problems attest to their power, their authority, their *exousia*.

My friend Cynthia Campbell says that “Mark begins the story of Jesus’ public ministry with this dramatic story about Christ’s power and authority because Mark wants us to reflect on the nature and scope of that authority. His original [readers] were in the middle of a very real life-and-death struggle. Following Jesus meant that many had been ostracized from their families; others had been [imprisoned]; some had even been killed. If they were going to continue on this path, it was really important to know that the one they were following was the real thing.”⁵

Mark shows his readers – past and present – that Christ is worthy of loyalty. Jesus taught with authority, passion, and clarity. When he spoke the ancient words, they came alive, so that people understood them anew, in their own time, and in their own circumstances. “He was such a compelling presence that people walked out of their ordinary lives and fell in step with him. He was such a commanding person that people whose lives were burdened with illness and isolation and pain found themselves liberated, set free to live and breathe again.”⁶ And that’s just the beginning. Christ’s death and resurrection show the extent of his power and authority to conquer *any* enemy . . . to emerge victorious from any challenge. Christ is one we can follow with confidence. He’s the real thing, my friend Cynthia says. The one Lord, the Apostle Paul says. The head of the church.

This statement is at the heart of our faith, and it really does solve all the problems in the great improvisation of life. How can I face the fact that I am dying? Jesus Christ is Lord. How can I forgive people who have wounded me? Jesus Christ is Lord. How can I trust that there’s a purpose for my life, and for your life, too? Jesus Christ is Lord. It is simple, on the one hand. But at the risk of sounding like, ya know, I’m not certain (?), I have to say, I believe it is not so simple day to day.

Consider Paul. He is like the silverback face to face with the hunter – you know what I’m saying? He’s confronting challenges that are new to him, and he needs to provide some direction to the people in his care. He has the love of God, the witness of Christ, the power of the Spirit, even, to guide him . . . yet you can tell he is struggling, as he works out what to say and what to do. In the chapter before the one we read today, Paul talks about sex and marriage. He is clearly giving his best advice, but (ya know?) *it’s advice*; it’s cautious, qualified, even a little wistful.

He tells the Corinthians, “I wish you were all as I am,”– *celibate*, that is. But they’re not, Paul knows, so he describes the next best thing. The next best thing, Paul says, is not a *command* . . . more like a *concession* to the people. Later on, Paul issues a command, but says: if you don’t follow it, try *this* or this *other* thing. Still later (when he gets to the part about virgins) Paul admits, “I have no command of the Lord, but *I give my*

⁵ Cynthia Campbell’s paper on Mark 1:21-28 for the 2012 meeting of the Moveable Feast.

⁶ Cynthia.

opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy." Do you know what I'm saying? Paul is doing the best he can, though he does not have all the answers.

Can you and I expect to do any better? Like Paul, we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord. Any authority, any power, any freedom that *we have* comes from him. Yet today we face new challenges – different than those of Paul and the church at Corinth. Issues raised by science, by technology, by democracy, by economics. Stuff Jesus said not a word about. We are improvising faithful lives and, if we're honest, there is *much* we do not know for sure. How can we exercise our *exousia* responsibly? How can we question, claim, and speak with the right kind of authority?

In today's text, Paul charts his course by a couple of stars that stood out to me. One thing Paul did was to recall what he *knew* about God: that there was *one God*, from whom all things came, and for whom all things exist . . . and there is *one Lord*, through whom all things came, and through whom we exist. Believing this, Paul could look at the marketplace and the meat sold there and not worry about its connection to "another god," because there simply *were no other gods*. This Paul said with conviction. The other thing Paul did was to think about his community – to recall each member with love, and to consider the good of the whole. He could see that while eating the meat would be *fine* for him, it would be disastrous for others. That realization shaped his thoughts and actions. So Paul's authority grew – as he held to *both of these things* – a deep knowledge of God on the one hand . . . steadfast love for the people God had made family to him on the other hand. So Paul came to teach with authority.

How can you and I speak with authority about our faith? How can *we* address the problems that we face with *exousia* – the good and healing power of Christ? I won't pretend to be sure. But (on my way to an answer) I keep coming back to something James Taneti said last week, at a committee meeting of the Presbytery. He described this church as a place where people live in gratitude – thankful for what God has done. We know that what we *do* matters, James said, but the main thing is what *God has done*. So we are grateful. The second thing he mentioned is the way that we care for one another. At our best, we are humble enough to listen to each other, he said, and courageous enough to challenge each other. Humble and courageous, together. As we engage the issues of *our* day – new questions about sex and the environment and bullying and economic warfare (all kinds of things!) – these will help us to find our way: our gratitude for what God has done . . . and our love for one another. They are limbs out on which we can walk – with power, with freedom, with authority.