Sunday, January 31, 1988
FROM WHENCE COMES AUTHORITY?
Mark 1:21-28

It was forty years ago, and her name was Alice Reinboldt — "Miss Reinboldt" to all of us. We only discovered her first name by accident. Other than her first and last names, we knew very little about her. I never did know where she had been born, where she grew up, where she went to school, whether or not she had brothers and sisters, or if she had ever been married.

She was my high school English teacher in Union, Missouri, a four-year high school with a total enrollment of 200. Miss Reinboldt had been teaching high school English and Latin for as long as anyone could remember. She was of average size, with gray hair, and it seemed to me and the other students that she was about age 60 and had been at that age for many years. She never seemed to change.

She taught as one who had authority. As far as anyone knew, she never had any discipline problems in her classes. A boy or a girl who would give other teachers fits did not get out of line in her classes. As far as I can remember, I never heard Miss Reinboldt raise her voice. Only one time can I ever remember her being absent, and the substitute was a tall, strong man who looked like he could handle anyone, but he never once had control of those classes all day long.

As students, we used to discuss with each other why we behaved so well in Miss Reinboldt's class. From whence came her authority? It was a mystery to us. She knew her subject matter thoroughly, but so did many other teachers who lacked authority. Why did we respect her so much? We never arrived at a satisfactory answer. She never threatened to send anyone to the principal's office. She didn't hit anyone's knuckles with a ruler. I never saw her angry or even raise her voice. In fact, I don't ever remember her having to ask any one of us in her classes to be quiet. The biggest bullies in school became meek as lambs in her classes.

Why do I remember her name after 40 years while at the same time I've forgotten the names of dozens of other teachers? Because she taught as one who had authority, and it was authentic authority that came from within her.

I thought of Miss Reinboldt again when I was studying the scripture lesson this past week from the Gospel of Mark — the passage that was read to you earlier:

"And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."

Jesus was near the beginning of his ministry of teaching, and yet the people recognized his authentic authority. They seemed to instinctively know that here was an individual to whom they should pay attention. There was something about him that made them listen. His teaching was not all that new; much of it can still be found in the Old Testament.

Why do some people have authentic authority and others do not? What is the source of this kind of authority?

Other kinds of authority are easier to explain.

The Authority of Office: Some positions in our society carry with them a certain kind of authority no matter who occupies them. We respect the authority of the office of a judge, a police officer, or someone with a rank higher than ours in the armed forces. They are even called “authorities.” The individual occupying the office may not be respected very much at all, but the office itself, the rank, or the title carries the authority.
Related to the authority of office is the authority that comes from having power — the power to force or coerce someone to do something. Incidentally, Jesus refused that kind of authority when offered to him by the devil.

The Authority of Knowledge: There is a certain amount of authority that comes from knowledge, from knowing more about a subject than others. Recently, John Smeltzer and I were at a ministers’ meeting, and one of the keynote speakers was Carl Sagan, an authority on space exploration, astronomy, nuclear power, and other related subjects. He’s an authority because he’s immersed himself in these subjects for years, and so when he speaks on these subjects, we tend to pay attention. Someone said to me after his speech that he had not heard anything new, and I replied that I had not heard a lot that was new either, but I had heard it now from someone who could speak with a certain authority, and that gave more credibility to what the speaker said.
There are times, however, that someone who has authority because of his or her knowledge in one field, or because of his or her fame in a particular profession, comes to believe that now he or she has authority in other areas as well.

And it’s not always that the individual claims the authority in some other field, but that we sometimes want to give them that authority. This leads to a third category of authority.

The Authority of Fame: There’s a kind of authority that comes with fame. It’s frequently seen in advertisements. In commercials, well-known actors and actresses are made out to be authorities on all kinds of products and issues. Manufacturers, producers, and salespeople seek the endorsement of famous people.
Sometimes, when a person gets a certain amount of fame, he or she believes that authority on all sorts of matters automatically comes with it. Or is it because we, the public, tend to connect fame with authority?

Recently, a commercial was shown that represented a new high or low in advertising chic. A man appeared on the screen clad in a physician’s white jacket. His opening line was a classic: “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” (The man is a steady performer on an afternoon soap opera.) He then went on to prescribe a variety of Vicks products.

The pity is that we would be thought to buy the word of an actor on a matter of health. But advertising researchers know us better than we think. Are we indeed that gullible? With the antics of some big-time TV evangelists up for exposure these days, this would be a good time to offer an amended version of that commercial: “I’m not a pastor, but I play one on TV.”

Fame and authority are not necessarily synonymous. Miss Reinboldt, my high school English teacher, was never famous in the usual meaning of that term. No one outside of that small town ever heard of her, but she taught as one having authority. In fact, we knew she had authority.

Jesus gained some fame because of his teachings with authority, but his authentic authority had nothing to do with his fame. When he was alive, people who met him recognized him as one who had an intrinsic authority even though they had never met him or heard of him before.

From whence comes authentic authority — the kind of authority my English teacher had and, on a larger scale, that which Jesus had?

Knowing Who We Are and Loving What We Do: Authentic authority comes to us as individuals when we know who we are and love what we are doing.
When students met Miss Reinboldt, they sensed immediately that here was an individual who did not need to draw attention to herself. She knew who she was. She did not have to say, “I’m a teacher and have two college degrees, so you had better pay attention to me.” She carried herself with an innate dignity and self-assurance.

Each class session was well-prepared, and you knew that she took her profession as a teacher very seriously. You sensed that, to her, being a teacher was a high calling. She loved the work of teaching, and she loved the subject matter she taught. This gave her authentic authority. As a teacher, she was not the center of attention; rather, the students and the subject matter were the center of attention. She never got in the way of her teaching.

Thus, she treated the students with respect and dignity. Even the most slovenly student was treated with kindness. She never put anyone down or embarrassed a student in front of the class. You knew that in her class, you would be treated with fairness.

There are individuals, and you may know some of them, who become teachers or preachers not because they thought they would love their work, but rather in an attempt to gain authority over others. They wanted the authority of the office of teacher or preacher.

Jesus had authentic authority because he knew who he was and loved what he was doing. He didn’t go around on purpose drawing attention to himself by shouting, “I’m the Son of God, you had better pay attention to me.” He loved being a teacher of God’s word, and he loved the people who came to him.

When he healed people, he did not do so to draw attention to himself or to show off his power in any way. On the contrary, he usually told people to keep it a secret that they had been healed. His mission, he said over and over again, was to draw attention to God’s power. He always pointed to something beyond himself.

Like any good teacher, he made his subject matter and his students the center of attention.

Letting God’s Power Work Through Us: Authentic authority comes to us as it did to Jesus and to my high school English teacher when we let the power of God work through us, when we let ourselves be used by God’s Spirit. And that means getting ourselves out of the way.
My high school English teacher allowed her subject matter and her love of teaching and love of students to use her, and in so doing, she was letting the power of God use her, whether she was conscious of it or not. Sometimes the power of God uses us or works through us in the guise of other forces. We, her students, recognized that something greater than her was coming through her, even though we couldn’t name it. That was part of her authentic authority.

When people met Jesus, I believe they could sense that something greater than Jesus was present. They could sense that God’s Spirit was working through him, and he was allowing that

Spirit to work. The average person who met Jesus might not have called it God's Spirit, but they recognized that something unusual was present in him. To have that kind of authority, we need to be open to letting God's Spirit use us and work through us.

Giving Our Lives Over to Something Greater: Authentic authority, the kind Jesus had and which my high school English teacher possessed, and which you can possess or perhaps already do possess, comes from giving our lives over to something greater than ourselves. For those of us who call ourselves Christians, it means giving our lives to follow the way of Christ. He becomes our authority, and through him, we find authentic authority. It is the ultimate authority of self-giving love. There is no coercion, no brute force, but there is a deep joy.

May you find that kind of authentic authority in your life. Amen.