Book 38

Sunday January 30, 2000

THE MYSTERY OF AUTHORITY

Mark 1:21-28

Last September I attended the 50th reunion of my high school graduation, the class of 1949, in Union, Missouri. I hadn't been to a reunion for many years. What amazed me the most were all of those old people. As we talked with each other about our high school days, many of us remembered one teacher especially, 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 knew where she had been born, or where she grew up, or where she went to school, or whether or not she had sisters or

brothers.

In our high school, she taught Latin and English and she had been doing this for as long as any of us could remember. She was of average size, with gray hair pulled back into a bun. When she was our teacher we guessed that she was about 60 years old and it also seemed that she had stayed at the same age for years. She never seemed to change.

But what everyone of us remembered more than anything else was that she taught as one who had authority. She never had any discipline problems in her classes. A student who would give other teachers fits, did not get out of line in her classes. As far

as I can recall I never heard Miss Reinboldt raise her voice. Students who never did their homework for other subjects always completed their homework for her classes.

Only one time can I ever remember her being absent. The substitute was a tall strong man who looked like he could handle anyone, but his classes that day were chaos. When Miss Reinboldt returned the next day, her classes were back in order.

As students we used to discuss with each other why we behaved so well in Miss Reinboldt's classes? At our 50th class reunion, the subject came up again. Her authority was a mystery to us. She knew her subject matter thoroughly and was always

well prepared for each class, but so did many other teachers who lacked her authority. Why did we respect her so much? What was the basis of her authority? We never arrived at a satisfactory answer. She never threatened to send anyone to the principal's office. She never 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 ever having to ask any student in her class to be quiet. The biggest bullies and trouble-makers in school became meek as lambs in her classes.

Why do I and my classmates remember her name after more than 50 years while at the same time we've forgotten dozens of other

teachers? Because she taught as one who had authority and it was authentic authority that came from within.

I thought of Miss Reinboldt again this past week when I was studying the Bible story from the Gospel of Mark--that passage that was read earlier. "They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came he (Jesus) entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching; for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes."

This incident takes place near the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. Yet the people already recognized his authority. They instinctively knew that here was an

individual to whom they should pay attention. There was something about him that made them listen. His teachings were not all that new. Most of them can still be found in the Old Testament. Yet he had an "internal" authority. There's a mystery associated with this kind of authority and this mystery is connected with God.

Some types of authority are easier to explain. They are not as mysterious. For example, there is the authority of the office. There are positions in our community and in our system of government which carry with them a certain kind of authority no matter who occupies them. Yet we would all agree that some people who occupy these offices seem to innately possess more authentic

authority than others.

Most of us respect the authority of a police officer or a judge or someone with a rank that is higher than ours if we are in the armed forces. People in certain positions are even called "authorities." The individual occupying the office may not be respected very much as an individual, but the office itself, or 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. Jesus refused this kind of authority when offered to him in one of the temptations. He knew that true authority

does not come from power. In fact the origin of the word "authority" comes from Latin and Greek words which mean to create, to enlarge, to enhance, to enable growth. And that's exactly what a good teacher does. There's a big difference between authority and authoritarianism, or the urge to control by force. Authority in its true meaning is actually the nurturing ingredient in our roles as leaders, parents, teachers, ministers, employees, spouses, lovers and friends. Healthy authority is neither about power or control. In its truest sense, authority means to author something from within oneself--a good marriage, a book, a job, an idea.

Another kind of authority is that which comes

from knowledge, from knowing more about a subject than most other people. Some years ago I remember being at a meeting where one of the main speakers was Peter Drucker, a recognized authority on management and leadership. He's an authority because he's immersed himself in these subjects for years so when he speaks on these issues we tend to pay attention.

Someone said to me after his speech that he had not heard much that was new. I said that was also true for me, but I had now heard it from someone who could speak with authority and that gave more credibility to what he had to say. My English teacher had that kind of authority. We knew that she was well versed in the subjects she taught. She

had a depth of knowledge. I'm sure that's also what people experienced in Jesus. His authority also was based on his knowledge of the Jewish scriptures. He knew the deeper meanings and not just surface material. That's why Mark's gospel says that "he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." The scribes were the technicians of the Jewish scriptures. They knew the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law. There's a difference. The Scribes could argue all day long about the commandments. But they would argue about the letter of the law. In the commandment about not working on the Sabbath, they would debate endlessly the definition of work, but ignore the deeper meaning of the commandment about the

necessity of rest, of taking time to be holy, about the need for relaxation from the daily stress of work.

There are times when someone who is a recognized authority in one field or because that person is a celebrity, he or she comes to believe that he or she has authority in other areas as well. It's also partly our fault. If someone is well known in one field of knowledge or is famous, we are tempted to give them authority in other areas.

Fame can give an individual and the public a false sense of authority. Some years back there was a commercial shown on television that illustrates this. A man appeared on the screen clad in a physician's white jacket.

His opening line was: "I'm not a doctor but I play one on TV." He had been a well-known actor in a television series. He then went on to describe and encourage us to use a non-prescription medical product.

Whether or not such ads are effective in persuading people to use a certain product I do not know. I do know that fame and authority are not automatically synonymous especially when one ties to transfer his or her authority from one field to another. Even in the same field it may not prove true. Because Tiger Woods uses a certain brand of golf equipment, it does not follow that if I use the same brand because he recommends it, I will improve my game.

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. She never made the headlines even in the local paper. But she taught as one having authority.

Jesus gained some fame because of his teaching with authority, but his authentic authority had nothing to do with his fame.

What is the origin of this kind of authentic authority? Here are some hints toward understanding the mystery of authority.

First of all, 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 am a teacher, therefore you have to respect me and remember I have two college degrees." She carried herself with an innate dignity and self assurance. She knew she was fulfilling her life's purpose which was to be a teacher.

We also were aware that other teachers had deep respect for her. She was part of a community of teachers and drew some of her authority from that community. She was not a loner or an outsider.

Each class session was well prepared and you knew that she took her profession

seriously. You sensed that to her to be a teacher was a very high calling. She loved the work of teaching and she loved the subjects she taught--English and Latin. This helped give her authentic authority. She was doing more than putting in her time in order to receive a pay check. 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 dignity and respect. 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 dignity and fairness. You also knew that she expected each student to

do his or her best, to fulfill whatever potential that existed.

There are individuals and you may have known some of them, who become preachers or teachers and other professionals not because they thought they would love their work, but rather as an attempt to gain authority over others. They wanted the authority of the position. What they really want is some kind of power over others.

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 am God's chosen one, you had better pay

attention to me." He loved being a teacher and revealer of God's love 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 by him. His mission, he said over and over again was to draw attention not to himself, but to God's love and power. He always pointed to something beyond himself. Like any good teacher, he made his subject matter and his students the center of attention.

Secondly, 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 allow ourselves to be used by God's spirit. 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. There are times when 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 spirit or power of God 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. Some of the people who met Jesus might not have called it God's spirit, but they recognized that something greater was present in him and his teachings.

This kind of authentic authority is not limited to Jesus or only a few special people. It is available to anyone no matter what your job or profession or vocation. It is available to you as parents of your children and grandparents. To have it means being open to letting God's spirit work through you. It also means being conscious that you are a

part of a community and that nothing you do is ever done in isolation. True authority, authentic authority is not derived from power but from trust and respect. True authority does not control, it authors. The young Nathaniel Hawthorne (born 1804) wrote to his mother: "I don't want to be a doctor and live by people's diseases; nor a minister to live by their sins; nor a lawyer to live by their quarrels. So I don't think there's anything left for me but to be an author."

You too can be an author and it doesn't mean you have to write articles or books. You can be an author as you nurture and encourage others and as you allow God's spirit to work through you. Amen.