Sunday, September 25, 2005
THE AUTHORITY QUESTION
Matthew 21:23-32

The authority question is a crucial one in all human relationships and institutions. When there is no recognized authority, anarchy prevails. Following the destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina, chaos took over in the Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center, where many people sought refuge because there was no recognized authority. There was no one to keep order. No one was in charge.

So it has been throughout history. In ancient tribal societies, a chief ruled. Sometimes he was elected, other times he was the strongest and best fighter, and sometimes it was an inherited position. The son of the chief often became the next chief. There were tribes where the chief ruled but also had to consult and deal with a tribal council.

In the United States and other countries with representative governments, we elect those in authority, and they have the power to appoint others. However, in human history, this is relatively new. For thousands of years, the authority to rule was based on the concept of "the divine right of kings, emperors, or czars." It was believed that rulers were appointed by God, and this divine right was inherited by members of the family. Remnants of so-called "royal families" still exist.

The authority question is always an issue in religious institutions and traditions. It's the question Jesus faced in the story read earlier from Matthew's gospel. One day, when Jesus was teaching in the temple, the recognized religious authorities in that community came to him and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" It's a good question.

They were not only questioning his authority to teach but also his other activities. Earlier in this story from Matthew's gospel, Jesus had entered the temple and driven out those who were buying and selling, those who had turned the temple court into a marketplace. He also overturned the tables of the money changers. So it is not surprising that those in charge, the authorities, came to him and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who put you in charge? You didn't ask us for permission." You can understand their question. They were good men who believed in what they were doing. They believed in the authority of their religious beliefs, its laws, and sacred rituals. They believed in the authority of their own office. Any challenge to their authority was a challenge to their very way of life. They were surprised and angry at the presumptuousness of this young man from Nazareth.

It wasn't the first time the authority issue had come up. When Jesus began his public teaching ministry and started attracting disciples and followers, the gospels state, "The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority."

Now, by cleansing the temple and forgiving sins, he was undermining the religious authorities of his day. They had not granted him a license. He had not asked for their permission or approval. Are you surprised that they questioned his authority? He was subverting their temple monopoly. He was a threat to their power.

It's no different today. Power always seeks to protect itself. Those in religious leadership are as susceptible as anyone. We don't want people entering the religious arena without proper

authorization, without going through the correct procedures to obtain a license. We want to be certain the person has attended the right college and seminary, and that all other credentials are in order.

Most denominations, including the United Church, have such regulations, and for good reason. But as with most things, it's possible to get hung up on the technicalities and not allow for any variance or exceptions. I have been on such examination committees earlier in my ministry. Years ago, when I applied for ordination, the authorities in charge convened a special committee to interview me because I had not attended their recommended college and seminary.

Sometimes I wonder how Jesus would have done as a candidate for rabbi or priest. Would he have made it through the credentials committee? You can imagine the committee's report: "The candidate seems to have trouble respecting the authorities in his tradition. We recommend that he be sent to a counselor to work on these issues before he goes any further in the process. There are many examples of this authority problem in his spiritual journey. He is reported to have been impertinent to the religious authorities as far back as age 12 when he debated theological questions with them in the temple without his parents' knowledge. His first sermon in his hometown synagogue made outrageous claims for his ministry. His internship committee report says that he rarely answered questions directly but responds to questions with more questions. Worst of all, he associates with people who have questionable reputations. He has even been known to eat and drink with them."

I have nothing against credentials committees and examinations in the professions, for example, lawyers, physicians, accountants, stockbrokers, insurance agents, psychologists, teachers, and clergy. Hopefully, such procedures keep most of the charlatans out. A front-page story in last Wednesday's Wall Street Journal gave a detailed account of a surgeon who had botched many operations because his credentials and history of practice were not carefully investigated.

But there is more to authentic authority — its origin and power — than simply having the right credentials, passing examinations, having the proper ancestors, or having a bishop who claims to be in the "apostolic succession" lay hands on your head.

In a sermon some years ago, I mentioned a high school English teacher of mine who had authentic authority. Other teachers in the high school had the same credentials, the same college degrees, and years of teaching experience, but they did not have her kind of authority. Her name was Miss Reinbolt. Other than her first and last name, we students knew nothing about her. She was of average size, had gray hair always fixed the same way, and we guessed her age to be about 60. She had been teaching Latin and English in our high school as long as we could remember. She never seemed to change.

She taught as one who had authority. She never had any discipline problems in her classes. Students who were unruly and who would give other teachers trouble were well-behaved in her classes. She always spoke quietly and firmly, never raising her voice. Only one time do I ever remember her being absent. The substitute teacher, a tall, strong man who looked like he could handle anyone, never had the authority Miss Reinbolt had. We learned more English in that one year than in any other class.

What was the source of her kind of authentic authority? Why did we respect her so much? Why did we pay attention and do our homework? Where did her authority come from? That's

the same question people had about Jesus. There's a mystery to this kind of authority that some people possess and others do not.

Some types of authority are easy to understand. There is the authority of office. Certain positions carry automatic authority, no matter who occupies them. You respect the authority of a judge in a courtroom. There is the authority of rank in the military. Police officers have the power to arrest because of the authority granted to them.

Another type of authority comes from knowledge, from research, and knowing more about a subject than others. College degrees and advanced degrees imply authority. Fame can carry with it implied authority that is not necessarily authentic. You could mistakenly assume that because someone is famous, he or she is an authority. In commercials, celebrity actors and actresses are displayed as being authorities on all kinds of products and services.

"By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?" That's the question the religious leaders asked Jesus. We never asked our high school English teacher that question. If we had, I wonder what she would have answered. Jesus didn't give a direct answer to the authority question. He knew that you can't convince people you have authority by words alone, by showing you have the proper credentials, or by quoting from the Bible. Not too many years ago, many esteemed women and men of faith in this country used "biblical" authority to justify slavery and racism.

The slaves themselves had a better and more accurate sense of real authority. In spite of laws that made it illegal for them to read, somehow they learned the story of Jesus and internalized it. So when slave owners told them that slaves should obey their masters because the Bible says slaves should obey their masters, they knew there was a higher authority than the system, higher than the slave master, higher than even the words from the Bible — that higher authority was Jesus himself.

Howard Thurman, a black minister, remembers his grandmother who was a slave. He wrote, "My regular chore was to do all the reading for my grandmother. She could neither read nor write. With a feeling of great timidity, I asked her one day why it was she would not let me read any of Paul's letters. What she told me, I shall never forget. 'During the days of slavery,' she said, 'the master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from St. Paul. At least three or four times a year, he used as a text: "Slaves, be obedient to your masters." Then he would go on to show how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read, and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible.'"

That grandmother knew the real authority is Jesus Christ. She knew it in her heart. She knew what the "reformed tradition" in Protestantism has always maintained about biblical authority — that it is not in the words themselves taken out of context, but in the way biblical words are interpreted in light of the world through Jesus Christ.

Jesus ended his conversation with the religious leaders by telling them a parable to illustrate his understanding of authentic authority. "A man had two sons, and he went to the first and said, 'Go and work in the vineyard today.' The first son said, 'No,' but afterward repented and went. He said to the second son, 'Go and work in the vineyard,' and he said, 'Yes,' but he did not go. 'Which of these two,' asked Jesus, 'did the will of his father?' And they answered, 'The first.'"

The key phrase in this parable is, “The first son said no, but afterward repented and went.” He changed his mind. He had enough courage and conscience to admit to himself and to God that he had made a mistake. He did what he had been asked to do. The second son said yes but didn’t show up. He said the right thing, but there was no corresponding action.

The parable tells you that true authority comes not from what you say you believe or what you say you are going to do. True authority comes from your actions, your behavior. Those with authentic authority do the work of God regardless of creeds, intellectual discussions, doctrines, and orthodoxies. God is more interested in your actions than in your promises. Jesus was not saying that promises are unimportant, but the proof is whether or not you keep your good promises. It is when you continually do the right thing that you begin to possess authentic authority.

Years ago, an employer who had lots of experience with people working for him said to me, “The number one trait I look for in an employee is that I can depend on him or her to show up and then do the work. I don’t pay a lot of attention to what people say they are going to do or not do.” It is when you show up and then do what you are supposed to do that you have true authority. Amen.