

“With Authority and Power”

Next Sunday is the highest holy day of American culture — Super Bowl Sunday — and the focus will be on power. Will the Chiefs’ defense be able to out-muscle and out-quick the Buccaneers’ offense? Or will the potent (that is, powerful) Tampa Bay scoring machine rack up the points over the vaunted Kansas City front line? *Ad nauseam* for the past week and in the week remaining those questions are addressed and answered.

I’d like to say that they’ve been asked in a myriad of ways, but no, they just keep being asked — on ESPN, on the local sports broadcasts, talk radio, print media — over and over again: *“Who will bring the greater firepower?”* So next Sunday we find out, and at least a third of the population will say, *“Who cares?”* (especially since the Browns aren’t playing!)

Power is a focus of concern for a lot of people. Every now and again the topic of wasteful duplication of services in Ohio at the state, county, and local level is brought to the fore. Every layer of government has essentially the same grouping of jobs — public works, finance, legal, development, etc... 88 counties, 600+ municipalities, 300+ school districts. *“Why is this so?”* one speaker asked recently, and then answered his own question, *“Because nobody in power wants to let go of the reins.”*

“Power is the great aphrodisiac,” according to Henry Kissinger. Lord Acton warned, *“Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”* But I think science fiction writer David Brin is more on target when he says, *“It is said that power corrupts, but actually it's more true that power attracts the corruptible. The sane are usually attracted by things other than power.”*

So battle is waged in Washington and Beijing, Tehran and Moscow, Caracas and Johannesburg . . . in Columbus, Albany, Sacramento, and Springfield . . . over who will control, who will wield power, who will

possess the office. And in just about every home in America, the most ongoing and hotly contested grab for power is over who will get to hold the TV remote.

There are varying levels of authority.

There is the authority of role or office. The police officer, the judge, the school principal all hold authority by virtue of their office. But that office must be exercised properly or the authority becomes moot. A judge who hands down verdicts and sentences without regard to the evidence or the law abuses the office. The police officer who bullies does likewise. The principal who never disciplines because of fear of a lawsuit abuses the office in the opposite direction.

There is also something called moral authority . . . the authority that comes from being in the right. Ghandi exhibited that kind of authority; it is the authority of the underdog, the outcast, the marginalized. Just being down and out does not confer such authority, but being “on the side of the angels” does.

Let me give one illustration about power and authority. Would you please take out your bulletin and hold it up? That you can take those pieces of paper and move them to where you have moved them is power (Luther called it “right-hand power”). That you did it because I asked you to is authority (some of you did not take out your bulletins . . . that will be noted).

Why did you do what I asked? Many of you will say, “*Because you asked me to.*” Some might reply, “*Because you’re the Pastor.*” A few might think, “*I’d feel silly if everyone else did and I didn’t.*” And obviously one or two of you said to yourselves, “*I’m not doing this. This is stupid.*” (again, this will be noted.)

Authority is different from power on several levels. Power is taken; authority is conferred. Power is self-generated; it comes from within. Authority is bestowed; it comes from without. Authority often “works” where power cannot.

Thursday, as I was walking into WalMart there was a mother with two little girls walking in the parking lot just ahead of me. The younger of the two girls tripped and fell down. I could tell that she was not seriously hurt; for one thing she had on enough clothing to cushion about a two-story drop. As the scene unfolded, things got ugly. Mom began yelling at this (I'm guessing) two-year-old, *"I told you to be careful. Now take my hand and get up and walk straight."* That's when the tear ducts opened, and the wailing began. Why do parents say this, *"You stop that crying or I'll give you something to cry about."* Every kid — every kid! — has a response to that (if they are smart, it is not verbalized): *"I thought I already had something to cry about."*

There are places where power does not work. There are times when the only authority that can work is moral authority [Luther called this "left-handed power."] I don't know what that mother's day had been like with this child — maybe the kid is a chronic tripper, or had been the model of toddler tantrums for the last four hours, or who knows what other aggravations confronted this Mom before she ever made it to that parking lot. So I do not want to judge her. But I do have to wonder how differently might that parking lot scene have unfolded had Mom knelt down, hugged the child, told her things would be all right, and lifted her back onto her feet.

There are times and places where power is powerless.

"What is this?" the people of Capernaum exclaim in today's Gospel. ***"A new teaching—with authority!"*** I find it curious that they identify what Jesus had done before their eyes as authority, not power. It's also curious that they label it as "teaching." What had happened was an exchange between Jesus and the demonic, which clearly showed that Jesus was in control.

As you read the Gospels, at least the Synoptics, you come to realize that the first individuals to recognize who Jesus is are the demons. ***"I know who you are, the Holy One of God,"*** barks this one. That should not be read that as defiance, but as fear (maybe with a touch of bravado). ***"Have***

you come to destroy us?” I’ll bet Jesus wanted to reply, *“What do you think, lamebrain? Duh!!”* Then Jesus **“rebuked him”** (the Greek means, *“shut him up”*) saying, **“Be silent, and come out of him!”**

This certainly has all the earmarks of a power encounter. Demonic acting out; Jesus acting back. Demonic challenging; Jesus taking control. Demonic struggling; Jesus demonstrating absolute mastery of the situation. In the end, the demon is cast out of this man who had been demonized and order has been brought to bear.

But the crowd calls this **“teaching — with authority”** Now, earlier on they had been reacting the same way to what Jesus had been saying in the synagogue. Mark tells us that they were **“astonished”** by what Jesus had to say. Commentator Richard Jensen (Preaching Mark's Gospel) describes the difference between Jesus and the scribes: *“Scribal authority was based on their ability to recite the opinion of many Rabbis on a given topic. Jesus' word had authority because when he spoke, it came to pass.”*

The people were so unaccustomed to such straightforward teaching that they dubbed it *καίνη* (*kainé*), a word in Greek that means not “new” as in “did not exist before this,” but “fresh.” Jesus is a breath of fresh air because He brings the message of the Word directly to the heart. Our brains are remarkable tools; but for matters of faith, relationships, or love the heart speaks the language that communicates. Love is at work in Jesus throughout this event.

I don’t know what we would do if a deranged person entered into our worship this morning. I would like to think that each and every one of us would extend a welcome, and a verbal, if not a physical, embrace. But I realize that this would be to expect a lot ... people with mental diseases are difficult to deal with, hard to warm to, even scary. A person being demonized is no easier to welcome. Of course, in Jesus’ day, they were instantaneously outcast.

You notice with Jesus that He never seems to be bothered in the slightest

by the presence of demons; His reaction is almost “Spock-esque”: “*Fascinating.*” But this is not Vulcan unemotionalism; it is plain, ordinary experience — He expects them to be there . . . so when they make themselves plain, all He does is acknowledge them and tell them to leave.

Love is the authority out of which Jesus acts . . . always. It is a moral authority, not authority from power. In fact, such moral authority acts out of what appears to be weakness. Jesus had no “standing” in Capernaum. He was not an eminent visiting rabbi. He was a “nobody” in that sense. A no-name.

In Mark’s Gospel Jesus often tells people not to speak about Him or what He had done — and everybody He tells to be quiet ignores that command and tells. (That is sort of the reverse of our reaction: Jesus has told us, “***Go and tell,***” and we choose to ignore that!) There are two reasons why Jesus wants to keep silent what He is doing: First, He knows that power attracts people for the wrong reasons. Just look at Washington D.C. and all the sycophants who are looking to gain some foothold in the White House and/or the Congress. Jesus has no intention of being drafted into the role of “magic dispenser.” Second, Jesus came to destroy Satan, not just to do battle with Satan’s minions. He came to die, and would allow nothing to distract or derail Him from that mission.

In all of these goings on, we really ought to pay attention to ask this question, “*Where are the disciples?*” At the beginning of today’s Gospel, we heard that “***Jesus and the disciples] went to Capernaum;* but that “***when the sabbath came, He [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught.*” So were the disciples skipping church that day? A little golf game? Maybe some fishing? (No, not likely.) Perhaps a picnic? Or are they part of the “they” who react to what Jesus has to say and what He does? I think it’s the latter (although I have to confess, I cannot defend that position on the basis of the text).****

I almost need for it to be the case that the disciples are in that crowd, because whenever we disciples listen to Jesus, we ought to be as amazed

as they. Often we are not. Often the Good News is old news to us — anything but “fresh” — because we are not looking for Jesus to really be doing anything profoundly interesting or exciting in our midst. It has been said that the seven words that kill churches are “*We’ve never done it that way before.*” I think there are four words that do the job more quickly: “*This too shall pass.*” We become inured to any form of excitement because we really do not expect that anything is going to happen.

It is spiritual lethargy. A kind of ennui that sets in by just going through the motions. The worst part of this is that we miss out on utilizing the very authority given to us. We fail to become the dazzling creatures we have been reborn to be.

St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “***God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.***” [2:4-7]

The authority you and I possess is the same authority that cast out demons, raised up the infirm, sighted the blind, gave hearing to the deaf and speech to the mute. “*Wait, Pastor, are you telling us that we can do these things?*” No, I am telling you that Christ can do these things and has given you the authority to act on His behalf.

It is all possible, indeed it is more than possible, it is promised . . . and it awaits each one of us just on the other side of our unbelief.

Amen.