

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: June 4, 2023 Yr. A. Trinity Sunday, 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 28:16-20

Title: What Kind of Authority?

Focus: Jesus exercises authority for the sake of healing and forgiveness. How shall we respond when commissioned by Jesus?

Gospel Reading: Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

How Do You View Effective Leadership?

I want you to think of a leader you admire. What is it about their leadership? What adjective or descriptive word would you use to describe their leadership?

And how does your Christian faith inform your views?

Jesus Commissions the Disciples

In today's gospel reading, Jesus commissions the disciples for leadership. In relationship with these opening questions, what does it suggest when Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and earth belongs to me," and then specifically commissions them? As he commissions them, notice the active verbs in command form:

- Go.
- Make disciples.
- Baptize.
- Teach.

And then his closing reassurance: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (v. 20).

If Jesus precedes these commissioning verbs, "Go, make disciples, baptize, and teach" with the qualifying statement. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," then we had better understand what Jesus means (or what Jesus in Matthew means) as we seek to live out the commission to which he calls us as disciples.

“Authority” or Greek *exousia* (ex-oo-see'-ah) in Matthew

- What does Jesus mean when he talks about authority?

To respond to that question, we're going to use scripture to help us understand and interpret scripture. Specifically, we're going to look at how Jesus in Matthew is described with respect to this word *authority*.

- There are 10 instances of this word in 6 passages in Matthew.
- The English *authority* is translated from the Greek *exousia* (ex-oo-see'-ah). In the most basic sense, it is defined as the power to act, authority.

Matthew 7:28-29 The Crowd Recognizes Jesus' Authority in his Teaching

²⁷Now when Jesus had finished saying these things [teaching in the Sermon on the Mount], the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹for he taught them as one having **authority**, and not as their scribes.

- There is something different about Jesus. Credibility, authenticity, authority.

Matthew 8:5-13 Jesus Heals a Centurion's Servant

⁵ When [Jesus] entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, appealing to him ⁶and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress.' ⁷And he said to him, 'I will come and cure him.' ⁸The centurion answered, 'Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; but only speak the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹**For I also am a man under authority**, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, "Go", and he goes, and to another, "Come", and he comes, and to my slave, "Do this", and the slave does it.' ¹⁰When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. ¹¹I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹²while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ¹³And to the centurion Jesus said, 'Go; let it be done for you according to your faith.' And the servant was healed in that hour.

- A centurion is a commander in the Roman legion. That title, *centurion*, comes from being in charge of 100 men.
- In this story, a Roman centurion recognizes the authority of Jesus—as one who can declare something and it will be done.
- Jesus uses this power, this ability, for the sake of healing.

Matthew 9:2-8 Jesus Heals a Man who is Paralyzed. The Scribes Question if he has Authority to Forgive Sins

² And just then some people were carrying a paralyzed man lying on a bed. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, 'Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.' ³Then some of the scribes said to themselves, 'This man is blaspheming.' ⁴But Jesus, perceiving their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts? ⁵For which is easier, to say, "Your sins are forgiven", or to say, "Stand up and walk"? ⁶But so that you may know that the Son of Man has **authority** on earth to forgive sins'—he then said to the paralytic—'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home.' ⁷And he stood up and went to his home. ⁸When the crowds saw it, they were filled with awe, and they glorified God, who had given such **authority** to human beings.

- Authority used for the sake of forgiveness and healing.

Matthew 10:1 Jesus grants Authority to the Disciples—also to Heal and Cure

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them **authority** over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness.

- Another example of authority used for the sake of forgiveness and healing—this time authority granted by Jesus to the disciples.

Matthew 21:23-27 The Authority of Jesus Questioned

²³ When [Jesus] entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him as he was teaching, and said, 'By what **authority** are you doing these things, and who gave you this **authority**?' ²⁴Jesus said to them, 'I will also ask you one question; if you tell me the answer, then I will also tell you by what **authority** I do these things. ²⁵Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?' And they argued with one another, 'If we say, "From heaven", he will say to us, "Why then did you not believe him?" ²⁶But if we say, "Of human origin", we are afraid of the crowd; for all regard John as a prophet.' ²⁷So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.' And he said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what **authority** I am doing these things.

- There is a dispute about Jesus' authority.

What Commonalities Do You Notice?

- These are all 10 instances of the Greek word **exousia** (ex-oo-see'-ah) or English *authority* across 6 passages in Matthew.

- *Who* has authority?
 - Jesus, as given by God.
 - The disciples, as granted by Jesus. They have authority because it is delegated or conferred by Jesus.
- Authority to do what?
 - Authority is used in connection with Jesus' **acts of healing and forgiveness.**
 - Authority is granted for a purpose--When Jesus commissions the disciples and sends them out,—in Matthew 28, it's
 - Go
 - Make disciples
 - Teach
 - Baptize
- What's the reaction to Jesus?
 - Some (the scribes and Chief Priests and elders as religious leaders) are cranky because they question if Jesus has this authority.
 - Others rejoice or celebrate Jesus' words and deeds because they recognize he is not acting authoritatively, but "with authority." He is exercising authority to provide healing and restoration—to benefit others.
- This is not an authority used to dominate or demand people's submission, but authority which empowers.
 - Authority is granted to others, like the disciples.
 - When people experience forgiveness and healing, that act restores them to community and to greater activity or self-reliance. It strengthens and benefits them.

Distortions of Authority—Contemporary American Civic and Religious Life

Yesterday, we had the memorial service giving thanks to God for the life of Larry Struve. In one of the "Lunches with Larry" he and I had in the week before his death, we talked about American civic life in a way that relates to this concept of leadership and authority.

We talked about our mutual concern when we saw leaders use power for their own gain, that deception and lying seem to be the norm, and that the atmosphere of extremism and attack discourage good leaders from seeking public leadership roles.

In Larry's book *Building Trust in Government: Governor Richard H. Bryan's Pursuit of the Common Good*¹ about the administration of Nevada Governor Richard Bryan, in which Larry served, Larry described the principles of fairness and justice and equal opportunity that characterized the administration of Richard Bryan. They were consistent with Gov. Bryan's personal characteristics: Honesty, respect for others, hard-working, authentic, and down-to-earth, sincere, positive attitude, thrifty, gracious, loyal. (pp. 2-18).

As I read the opening chapter, I knew that Larry was writing about Richard Bryan, but it seemed to me that Larry's description could just as easily been of himself. Larry was drawn to those qualities in Richard Bryan because they were true of Larry as well. He admired in another what he himself displayed.

"[He] View[ed] holding office as a trust to be used for the benefit and protection of society, promotion of the common good, and enhancement of good citizenship among the people—not as a personal reward to be exploited while in office" (p. 19).

Larry was inspired to write this book because what he experienced in the leadership of Richard Bryan (and which Larry himself exhibited) is so refreshingly at odds with the trends we see in American civic life today in which power is exercised to demand one's own way, oftentimes for one's own gain or for the gain of one's close cohorts, to the expense of others. It seems less common that authority is used for the common good. Larry wanted to challenge and inspire present and future leaders to exercise leadership in this way—just leadership for the sake of the common good.

Moreover, it's not just politicians who are enamored with power or a certain kind of exercise of authority, but segments of the Christian Church in America have become seduced by power exercised as dominance rather than the consistent example we observe here in Matthew of Jesus exercising authority for the sake of forgiveness and healing and to empower others or bring them to wholeness. They behave as though they want to impose their will or their way upon others. And I don't think that's what Jesus modeled, as we have observed here in Matthew.

There are those of us in the Christian Church who have not been very good about following the example of Jesus, but who have been seduced by the lure of power.

A confessional prayer: Jesus, free us from exercising power that demands our own way. Help us place our trust in you and follow your example of loving service.

May it be so with us.

¹ Larry D. Struve, *Building Trust in Government: Gov. Richard H. Bryan's Pursuit of the Common Good* (Reno, Keystone Press, 2021).