

1 Samuel 3: 1-10
Mark 2: 23-28
June 3, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Last week I directed your attention to the importance of the word “authority” in the English translation of Jesus’ Great Commission in Matthew, chapter twenty-eight. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples...” You will recall that “authority” translates the Greek word “*exousia*” which indicates the ability to do something. The word is translated “power” in the King James Version.

Yet the words “authority” and “power” have different connotations, at least in our time. “Power” suggests the ability to impose an individual will on another person or thing. I have power to kick a ball and cause it to move. When applied to the human level power is the attempt to impose our will on another human being without their cooperation. You *will* do this. In order to be successful, power must resort to threats of punishment—as in, “You will do this *or else.*” Of course effective use of power is more sophisticated. It not only threatens but offers rewards for obedience. For generations the world’s religions have employed this combination of threats and rewards to expand and hold their communities together.

Yet Jesus rejects this understanding. Throughout his ministry he refuses to employ the worldly understanding of power. His followers are willing and freely seek to do what he asks. Early in his ministry he astounds the crowds by his teaching because he speaks with *authority* and not like the experts in the Law of Moses.

This word authority, as we saw last week turns the worldly understanding of power upside down. Whereas power is coercive and demands obedience with threats and

manipulative promises, authority elicits obedience through freely given love and trust. Whereas power seeks to impose the will of one person upon another, authority earns the willingness to follow by recognizing the needs and yearnings of those he or she seeks to guide. Instead of imposing conformity to an external rule as power does, authority seeks effectiveness through the attitude of service. Jesus consistently refused to use power. With equal consistency he humbled himself before his heavenly father and lived the dual life of service to God and service to his brothers and sisters. "I am among you as one who serves." This same attitude of service Jesus urged upon his disciples.

The rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you. Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life for many. (Mt. 20: 28)

This humble service puts the good of the other first. It recognizes that the other is not in service to my needs and desires. She or he has their own path prepared by God. Authority—true and effective authority recognizes the freedom of each human being. People who are granted authority by those who they are to guide are not perceived as *over* them. With Jesus, they are *among them as one who serves*.

This is a way-too-long preamble to the pronouncement Jesus makes in response to the criticism of the disciples by the Pharisees when they broke off the heads of grain and ate them on the Sabbath. On the one hand the Pharisees seem to be stick figure narrow legalists. The Law of Moses strictly forbids work on the Sabbath. It is not wrong to eat. It is prohibited to prepare any food to eat on the Sabbath.

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Six days shall you labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slaves, your livestock or the alien resident in

your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord rested on the seventh day and consecrated it. (Ex. 20: 8-11)

Before we condemn the Pharisees we must understand that this is not a guideline from God. It is a commandment. The Rabbis saw the seventh day as an act of creation. Thus without a day of rest creation is incomplete. At issue for the Pharisees on this day is not that the disciples are eating; but that in the act of plucking the grain and rubbing the heads in their hands they are engaging in a form of threshing—which is work.

Are they wrong? Is not the holiness of the Sabbath worth defending? What happens to a world that no longer observes the Sabbath but works or engages in multiple activities none of which lead a person to reflect of the reality of God and his creating the heavens and the earth? What happens to society that treats the Sabbath as just another day and takes no time to remember God and his loving faithfulness? In the book of Judges we hear of a generation did not know God or what he had done for Israel. The results were disastrous. As we look at American culture today, aren't we concerned? Isn't there a generation growing up who does not know God and what he has done for humanity-- who utters the divine Name and that of Jesus only as an expletive? Shouldn't Jesus acknowledge the Pharisee's concerns? Maybe if he lived in 2018 in the United States he might!

Yet I think that Jesus sees in this a teachable moment. He sees the opportunity to learn the difference between following the law blindly and obeying it out of love and trust. I suspect that while the Pharisees had a point, their motivation had less to do with concern for the disciples forgetting God than enforcing the law for its own sake. Indeed Jesus appeals to David in the first book of Samuel. He is showing that the Law is not inflexible. It admits different

applications given different circumstances. For Jesus then, the laws of the Sabbath are not rigid legalisms to be imposed upon people to maintain some ideal of holiness. *They are the means of facilitating a greater intimacy with God.*

This what Jesus means when he says, “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” Yet this pronouncement cuts both ways. On the one hand it challenges the formal practice of religion for its own sake. The mass of people who do not darken the doors of churches do so because they see religion as a form of tyranny, imposing rules upon people and demanding conformity while practicing empty and outdated rituals. The director of the HUPC nursery school told me that one reason people don’t want to send their children is that it is a church school and they are afraid of their children being proselytized. Clearly there is an urgent need to practice authentic Christian faith which is not dictated by rules. As the Apostle Paul says to the Philippians: the *only* compulsory rule among Christians is to love one another and to strive to outdo one another in seeking each other’s good.

Yet without some intention, some disciplined practice of faith, this understanding of Jesus’ words can only lead to a loss of focus. If all we understand by the Sabbath being created for human beings then what is to prevent every person doing what she or he thinks best—that is, observing the Sabbath or not? If the Sabbath is given for our good, clearly is *not good* to ignore this gift. How do we practice the Sabbath in a loving and renewing way which invites people to regain the experience of a loving God guiding their lives?

It comes back to Jesus’ putting his life in service to our becoming intimate with God. It is in acknowledging Jesus’ authority. It is acknowledging Jesus as Lord of the Sabbath. Amen.