

Matthew 28: 16-20
May 27, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In 1984, one month after our son Ben was born, MJ and I interviewed to be co-pastors of a yoked parish in Roxbury and Dorchester Massachusetts. They were both African American congregations. In retrospect, I believe that the good members of the two churches looked at this young couple with a baby and thought, “What are they thinking?”

In the course of the interview a woman asked a question which has stayed with me. She asked, “Do members of the church follow you because you are the minister or because they want to?” In other words, are you followed because of the respect given to your title; or do people follow you willingly out of love and trust?

I begin this way because for the earliest Christian writers the most important line in the passage we just heard is the very first one: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” In a world ruled by multiple gods, imperial power, social stratification and class privilege, these writers were at pains to proclaim that there is only one ruler of the world. It is not the emperor or his local representatives. It is not the current social and economic structure which benefits the few at the expense of the many. It is not the power to enforce order and obedience through military power. Instead, true authority resides only in one being—God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

In later years when the Roman Empire was Christianized and Jesus had become recognized as King of kings, scholars would turn their attention to the ritual formula which has given us the doctrine of the Trinity.

Yet the earliest Christian writers had it right. The key to the entire passage is the first: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” And so this morning I want to share some thoughts about what Jesus might mean by the word translated into English as “authority.”

The Greek word which lies underneath the English is *exousia*. It literally means the ability to accomplish something. The King James Version in its desire to support the notion of the divine right of kings, translates the Greek word as “power.” Power is the ability to make a direct impact on something or someone. I can make ball move by kicking it. In the business realm I can hire and fire. In its crudest sense power is the ability to impose my personal will upon people and things. It is what the translators of the King James Version had in mind. They wanted it understood the King had received his power from Jesus.

Yet authority carries a very different connotation. Authority is the fruit of a relationship of trust. The member of the church who asked if people followed my leadership willingly she was talking about the power to lead that is *granted* by those who serve *under* that authority. The subtle implication is this: authority is granted to the leader. He or she may be in a position of power; but the actual capacity to lead is only possible if people *willingly cooperate*. This authority does not happen by right of position. It was and continues to be the foundation of Jesus’ own understanding of his power to make things happen.

The first and most important quality necessary for someone to be *in* authority as opposed to being merely in power is this: she or he must be able to be *under authority*. Jesus said this over and over again. “I can do nothing apart from the will of my Father.” “I am among you as one who serves.” “Come to me all you are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will

give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls.” “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be *thy* name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus pleaded with God to let the cup of suffering from his lips yet concluded his prayer with submission, “Yet nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.”

When I quote these words I realize that I don’t follow Jesus because I am supposed to follow him. I don’t follow him because I fear some terrible future or covet some heavenly reward. I follow Jesus because I love him. I love him for who he is and for the gentle humility with which he conveyed the heart of the character of God, his heavenly father. I realize I do not follow him because of all the miracles and spiritual feats. I am loyal to him not because of all he has done and might do for me. I love him and trust him with my life because Jesus is who he is—the one whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light; who is gentle and meek and in whom I find rest for my soul. There for Jesus is my Lord and I am willing to follow where he leads. Just because.

It is interesting that the alternative to “power” as the translation of the Greek word is *authority*. The Latin root is *auctor* which means “writer.” We get our word *author* from it. All of the great authors speak of the fact that at a certain point the characters in their stories take on a life of their own. The job of the author becomes to listen to her or his characters and to give them freedom to develop in their own way. A bad novel is often one where the writer has forced the characters to live within the plot line. When this happens the characters are flat and

without life. The writer has become simply a marionette puppeteer. Some people think God is like that.

But God's power shown in the authority of Jesus is quite different. We are created with the capacity to respond to God as revealed in Jesus, *but we are not coerced to do so*. We are given freedom to live. God's greatest joy is the freely returned love of a grateful son or daughter. This is the true authority which God has given Jesus.

The rest of the passage rests on this understanding. Jesus is not ordering his disciples to go out and proclaim and baptize and teach because the king orders it to be done. He wants them to do it because they *love him* and therefore to follow wherever he leads by the loving power of the Holy Spirit. Thus the spread of the Gospel is done by women and men who are under the authority of Jesus who was under the authority of God and who continues to reign by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the source of whatever power we have to make God's love in Jesus visible.

May this love and humility be the basis for our mission and ministry. Amen.