

“Ultimate Authority”

Mark 1.21–28

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 1 February 2009

People my age and younger – and some of you graying Baby Boomers, too – have a knee-jerk reaction to the word, “authority.” Part of that is a result of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 70s: women’s liberation, gay liberation (lesbians were not yet liberated – they had a double whammy dealing with sexist gay men!), black power, and the anti-war movement. It was the era of flower children and the counter-culture. And though there are certainly enduring legacies of that era – including electing an African-American president and being an Open and Affirming church – the people who populated those movements tended to become yuppies who cared more for their brokerage accounts than for free love, preserving the planet, and working for peace. Greed became the order of the day in the 1980s. (And please remember that there is still a lot of work to do in a nation where women still earn 81 cents on the dollar compared to their male counterparts in the same jobs.) Things are changing, though, as we are forced by the economic realities in which we live, to look at what ultimately matters most.

Even though you may think that one of the hallmarks of the Feminist movement is opposing authority in all its forms, some feminist philosophers are beginning to shift that idea. Rebecca Hanrahan and Louise Antony write, “Feminism is an antiauthoritarian movement that has sought to unmask many traditional ‘authorities’ as ungrounded. Given this, it might seem as if feminists are required to abandon the concept of authority altogether. But . . . the exercise of authority enables us to coordinate our efforts to achieve larger social goods and, hence, should be preserved. Instead, what is needed and what we provide for here is a way to distinguish legitimate authority from objectionable authoritarianism.”¹

So, there needs to be a dialogue between freedom and authority. We need to examine to whom or to what in our own lives we give authority to, and whether that is legitimate or not. And if we find that our prior assumptions miss the mark, we need to make adjustments.



Let me pose an ethical question for you to consider: **What is the dominant force in your decision-making?** Is it your political persuasion? Your socio-economic class? Your race? Your gender? Your nationality? Your relative affluence? Your self-interest? Your role as a parent or child? Your sense of pleasure? . . . Or is it your faith?

Let me come at this from a slightly different angle: **In whom do you put your ultimate trust?** When push comes to shove, where do you assign your trust. . . if you can trust anyone? Is it to your doctor? Your stock broker? Your therapist? Your personal trainer? Your spouse or partner? Your employer? Your president? Your minister?

Let me ask the question yet a third way: **Whom do you serve?** Is it your CitiCard balance? Your kids’ activities and chauffeuring them around town? Your student loan debt? Your occupation? Your spouse or partner? You self? Your God?

All of these questions point toward the A-word. . . authority. **Who or what is authoritative in your life?** And I know a lot of us could quip, “It’s the economy, stupid.” But, there is nothing in this or any economy that is going to help you lead a truly good life and keep you from death and lead you into life beyond death.

¹ Rebecca Hanrahan, Louise Antony, “Because I Said So: Toward a Feminist Theory of Authority” in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 2005 20:4, 59-79

If we don't give authority to God, then we give it to the range of petty deities of our culture. The anti-institutional thrust of the 1960s and 70s taught us to trust no one, especially if they were over 30 or in a position of authority, and that's one of the reasons this country has devolved into a state of radical individualism, caring little for the common good or the larger consequences, but I think that's beginning to change. The pendulum has begun to swing in the opposite direction.

“What is this? A new teaching – with authority!”

You and I have a lot of advantages in considering the questions I've posed. We are part of a 400-year-old religious tradition that has diminished human authority from bishops and popes and kings and put the authority back where it belongs: with God. It isn't that Sharon and I don't have pastoral authority, we do, but we firmly believe that we are not priests, not gatekeepers that come between you and God. You have direct access to the source of ultimate authority.

One of the great Christian ethicists of the 20th century, a UCC member who taught at Yale Divinity School was H. Richard Niebuhr, who wrote, “To make our decisions in faith . . . is to make them in view of the fact that the world of culture – [hu]man[ity]’s achievement – exists within the world of grace – God’s kingdom.”² So, if Niebuhr is correct, everything we do, think, say, act, feel, own, profess, is done within the context of God’s reign.



Now, this may scare a few people away from our new members class which starts next week, but our membership covenant contains these words: “I give myself *unreservedly* to God’s service.” So, when each of us who are members of this particular congregation entered the covenant, we made a solemn vow to place ourselves under the authority of God – with nothing held back. So, **how are you doing with that commitment?**

God is ultimately in charge, whether we acknowledge it or not. But, when we covenant to give ourselves unreserved to God’s service, we are saying explicitly whose authority we are under.

We are in a time of economic uncertainty and sometimes frightening change. And it is precisely in such times that it is good to have a sense of clarity that we are God’s people, and there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God.

So, here is where the incredible dialogue between authority and liberation meet: When we give ourselves fully to God (and only a small handful of human beings I know of have ever done that) **we free ourselves from every other master**: success, wealth, fame, longevity, and even student loan debt.

When we share in Holy Communion, we feast at God’s table. And in a very tangible way, we acknowledge that we are utterly dependent upon God for everything that keeps us alive – body and soul. So, when you come forward and receive the elements of bread and wine, I invite you to think carefully about whom you serve, and what ultimate authority you recognize in your life. And may this table be for you a sign of God’s liberating reign.

Amen.

² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 256.