

“A New Authority” Mark 1.21–28
 The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 2 Feb 2003

When I preached on this text three years ago, and it was on the occasion of the installation of the associate minister at The First Church in Windsor, Connecticut. In that sermon, I addressed the teaching aspect of ordained ministry. “They were astounded at his teaching,” says the gospel writer, “for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”¹ But we are in a different time than we were three years ago, and I found, in reading this passage from the beginning of Mark’s gospel, that its message struck me quite differently. In rereading it, the text seemed much less about teaching, and a lot more about authority.

Authority is one of those words that most of us shy away from. From our founding, the Congregational tradition has been dedicated to the idea that authority for the church is not lodged with a bishop, but with a congregation. Later, we expanded the idea to share authority among the association of churches, while retaining our autonomy. And when the Congregational churches merged with the Christian churches in the 1920s, we inherited another idea: that Jesus Christ is the sole head of the church.

That’s sometimes been hard for me to get my head around: that Jesus is the sole head of the church. Does that mean that when we don’t meet our budget or when a minister engages in pastoral misconduct that it’s Jesus’ fault? No, of course not. What it implies is that the lessons of Jesus and the continuing presence of the risen Christ are meant to guide us, and that no person, whether a bishop or a pope or even a General Minister and President, will be the head of the church.



This gets down to the question of who has authority and who doesn’t. It’s fairly clear from an ecclesiastical perspective where authority lies in our UCC tradition: it lies with God, and it lies with the persons who are called together as the church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

But what about the rest of our lives? Where does authority lie in the remainder of our decision making? Do we cut ourselves off from the idea that we are God’s people and that God is ultimately in charge? What is it that we pray for – twice – every time we offer the Lord’s Prayer? We pray for the kingdom of God, or what Walter Wink calls, “God’s domination-free order.”

“The basic question is this,” writes noted New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, “How does human power exercise its rule and how, in contrast, does divine power exercise its rule? The Kingdom of God is people under divine rule – and that, as ideal, transcends and judges all human rule.”²

When do you use your faith in your decision-making, and when do you use other criteria? Most of us don’t use theological constructs in deciding whether to have an English muffin or a bagel for breakfast (though your theology might lead you to purchase fair-trade coffee from the church!).

But, how about when you have to make decisions of greater importance? Does your sense of being part of the kingdom of God enter into your decision about the candidate for whom you will vote? ...the amount you pledge to the church each year? ...the kind of car you drive? You may have heard about an ad campaign launched by the

¹ Mark 1.22

² John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 55.

National Council of Churches, which urges people to drive fuel-efficient vehicles by asking, “WWJD?” “What would Jesus *drive?*”

It may never have occurred to you to bring your theology into that kind of decision-making. But let me repeat those questions posed by John Dominic Crossan: “How does human power exercise its rule and how, in contrast, does divine power exercise its rule? The Kingdom of God is people under divine rule – and that, as ideal, transcends and judges all human rule.”

So, in your decision-making, there has to be some sort of priority in the weight you give to things: it’s important to have food and shelter and a certain quality of life, but what about when your choices come into conflict with the way Jesus is calling you? When and what would you be willing to give up in order to follow Jesus?

It’s easy for us to say that Dietrich Bonhoeffer used his Christian faith to stand up to the culture of Nazi Germany, even to the point of giving his life for what he believed. That’s fairly clear to most of us. It gets a little fuzzier when the conflict between the exercise of human power and the exercise of divine power are not so clear-cut.

Do you think opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge up for oil production is a good idea? *What does your faith say about that?* Do you think the death penalty is a good idea? *What does your faith say about that?* Do you think eliminating the estate tax is a good idea? *What does your faith say about that?* Do you think a pre-emptive war in Iraq is a good idea? *What does your faith say about that?*

When does Jesus’ life and teaching trump our own self-interest? And when do we go ahead and do it anyway? Is the phrase “enlightened self-interest” an oxymoron – can anything done for our own self-interest be enlightened? Or is there a path that we are called to follow that puts self-interest on the back burner? It depends on where each of us as individuals, and we together as a community, invests our sense of authority.



Okay, fair enough...so what are the “rules” in this kingdom of God? We have a pretty fair set of laws and covenants in the Hebrew Bible that were essentially discarded by Jesus and the early church. We have the witness of the Hebrew prophets who stood up for the widow and the orphan, who championed the poor and the oppressed. And we have an amazing example of how to live in the person of Jesus – the flesh-and-blood teacher of Nazareth – who had the audacity to challenge the powers of his day in saying that we’ve got our priorities all wrong.

In 1897 Charles Sheldon, a Congregational minister, wrote a novel called *In His Steps*, which was designed to help popularize the Social Gospel movement of the day. Unbelievably, this novel is still in print, though it’s sold primarily by evangelical bookstores. The protagonist is a minister in a small Midwestern town who is haunted by the appearance of a homeless man on his doorstep. The man’s death causes the minister to ask what more he and his congregation might have done to prevent the social situation that makes it possible for homelessness to exist, and he poses the question: “WWJD:” “What would Jesus do?” And it’s from that 19th century Congregationalist that the WWJD phenomenon arose.

All that said, “WWJD” isn’t such a bad question to ask, but I’m afraid we often ask it at the wrong times. I’m not sure it’s a useful question to ask when you want to have a second bowl of ice cream after dinner (Jesus didn’t have ice cream) or when you’re discovering your sexual identity (Jesus didn’t have...well, whatever). But it is a **good** question to ask when you’re pondering what your response to homelessness should be or how you’re going to spend your wealth or whether you ought to support a pre-emptive

war in Iraq. And it may not provide clear answers, but rather another perspective from which to view your decision-making.

Yet another UCC member, H. Richard Niebuhr, wrote more than 50 years ago in his classic work, *Christ and Culture*, “To make our decisions in faith is to make them in view of the fact that no single man or group or historical time is the church; but that there is a church of faith in which we do our partial, relative work and on which we count. . . . It is to make them in view of the fact that the world of culture—man’s achievement—exists within the world of grace—God’s kingdom.”³

We may not be able to tell exactly what Jesus would do in given circumstances, but we can use what we know about Jesus and the good news of God’s kingdom to approach our discernment of the question. And we need to commit to a new authority: not one that is brought to us by Madison Avenue or Hollywood or even Silicon Valley.



Why do we need to follow God, rather than “the powers and principalities” of the world? Clearly, because that is what we are called to do as persons of faith. We are saying, through our words, deeds, and prayers, who we trust and where we see authority. And we enact it in our decision-making, our politics, our prayers – in short, though every dimension of the lives we lead. It all counts.

“Intercessory prayer,” writes Walter Wink, “visualizes an alternative future to the one apparently fated by the momentum of current forces. Prayer infuses the air of a time yet to be into the suffocating atmosphere of the present. ***History belongs to the intercessors who believe the future into being.*** . . . The future belongs to whoever can envision a new and desirable possibility, which faith then fixes upon as inevitable.”⁴

As we stand at the doorstep of war, we must ask ourselves as persons of faith what we are called to do. And one of the things I know we are called to do is to have hope. Hope is not the same as wishful thinking or being a Pollyanna. Hope is living in the reality of God’s presence among us and working for God’s kingdom here and now in every way we are able.

If we really believe that God is the ultimate authority, then we must live into that belief. It is up to each of us to listen to this new, authoritative teaching: it is the gospel of peace.

Amen.

³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, p. 256.

⁴ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be*, p. 185