



CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

THE POWER TO ACT?

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Texts: Deuteronomy 18:18–20

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.

Mark 1:21–28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are.”

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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My child Nery turned 7 years old last Monday. This smart, strong, funny, brave, joyful, compassionate, and beautiful child is the most extraordinary person I have ever had the joy to meet. Her life has given me gifts abundant day after day, and I feel the deepest gratitude to be her papi. Feliz Cumpleaños, mi almita.

The day that this little person emerged into the world was cold and blustery with the wind being pulled over the ice of Lake Michigan. Nora’s labor was long and complicated and by the time the emergency surgery was complete it was deep into the darkest parts of the night. And yet there was this little cry reaching out into the cold brightness of the world seeking help, seeking love, seeking to know she was not alone. Because of the worries post C-section, I was the first to lay my tired and eager eyes on this new life. And there she was naked and alone on a warming table waiting for me. I walked over and was overwhelmed by the sight of her. She had my face and Nora’s eyes and nose and a full head of black hair. I stood there paralyzed by twin reactions: love and fear. I stood there and was instantly drenched with the reality that I had absolutely no idea what to do now. I waited for someone to tell me what I was allowed to do, but all hands were busy putting Nora back together again. I was afraid I would hurt her or do something wrong. Quickly though I decided to set aside the fear and act with love. I quickly seized upon my authority as her papi and I got down close to her and smelled her sweet newness. I put one hand on her chest and the other on her hand and I began to talk to her. In that moment, I used my power to act in gentleness and love and warmth.

While the birth of a new life is a particular example, I imagine that this moment of decision points to a universal experience. We have each been presented by moments of choice in which we must decide what

our involvement should be, what our authority might be, what is within our power to do. Questions of authority and power are foundational to the human experiment, and we have attempted to create answers in many ways. Sometimes we have done so through loving, healing, compassionate means, but often we have found it easier to do so through war, subjugation, enslavement, theft, violence, marginalization, and state-sanctioned crucifixions.

The text from Deuteronomy is wrestling with this as well. God will bring a prophet who will carry God's truth and we must listen to them . . . unless they are acting in the name of other gods or speaking falsely about this God—then they will die. The division seems clear: Some prophets are sent by God and others are pretenders to this authority. It is clear at least until we, those asked to follow, wonder how we will know the difference.

A similar question arises in the Mark text. Jesus has just recently found some friends to follow his teaching and they enter a synagogue and Jesus begins to teach. The people there were astounded by his teaching because he did so with authority. And then he encountered a sick person who was healed and all who saw it were again amazed at this authority. This again seems straightforward until we, the followers of the story of Jesus, wonder what authority he presented? What did he do that was so authoritative as to be astounding?

In some ways it is easy to assume the answer now because we think we know the rest of the story. We can settle into a presumed knowledge of who was a real prophet and who was not because we have this biblical text that tells us an answer. The prophets are named as prophets in the telling of their stories, but was it always as clear to those at the time? We know that false prophets often still have abundant following. So, how did the ancient Israelites distinguish one prophet from another? Using the keyword from the Mark text, how did they know who was speaking with authority?

Of course, we will never quite know the answer to this question. We may be able to come to a meaningful guess, though, if we begin to look more closely at the word “authority.” The Greek word for authority in Mark is *eksousia*. This word is often translated into English as “authority” but can also mean “the power to act” with both a spiritual and earthly meaning. If we replace this new translation into this text it now says, “for he taught them as one having the power to act” and “What is this? A new teaching—with the power to act!”

To my ear, at least, this alternative translation changes the power dynamic. Authority seems to imply the power over another or one having more ability than another. The power to act seems to be more accessible. Jesus had the power to act. But so do I and so do you. We all have the power to act. The power to act is foundational to our humanness.

If we continue to play with this alternative translation, what then made Jesus' actions so astounding? If all of us have the power to act, then what gives Jesus' actions this extra significance? The text doesn't tell us what he taught that was so powerful, but we can assume, based on what we later learn about Jesus' teachings, that it was likely a recommitment to love. Later in Mark we hear Jesus declare that the greatest commandment is to love God and to love the other as you love yourself. This teaching was so very different than what was typically taught in this first-century Jewish region of the Roman Empire. In that milieu of imperial oppression, purity laws and strict rule adherence, a person teaching that love of God, self and other is primary to all else was astounding. And then for Jesus to put those teachings into action by healing the sick man was love in action. Dealing directly with a sick person in the synagogue defiled one's appearance of purity. Most sick people were ignored and avoided. Jesus not only taught with the power to act but then demonstrated it.

Most people would have been afraid of the sick man, the one described as having demons. Instead, Jesus took his teachings and applied them in action. He walked the walk, so to speak. This was an action with

great cultural consequences and would likely have been frightening. To act against the expectations of one's society is frightening. To act in a way that ignores the socially constructed rules and instead focuses on the love and healing of a marginalized person would have been frightening. We don't know if Jesus was frightened. We do know what the story says his actions were. How often have we ignored the hurting of those around us, those directly in front of us, because of societal fears and expectations? How often has our fear of what our society would say about us stopped us from living this commandment to love God and to love the other as we love ourselves? How often do we suppress our authority, our own power to act because of the potential social consequences?

Fear is a contagious thing. My child's friend recently described in detail the monster that was under her bed and the fear that she held. At bedtime Nery was afraid, not because she thought there was a monster under her bed, but because of the monster under someone else's bed. We talked about how sometimes people try to make others afraid with us so that we feel less alone in our fear. We pull others into our fears because we then feel validated. Since fear is easily contagious, we begin over time to create societal rules based on these fears.

Instead, what if we used our power to act, our own authority, to act in love and not in the contagious fears of our culture? What if we approached the metaphorical sick person in the synagogue with loving compassion instead of avoiding them out of fear of what our society says? I know this is a difficult task, which is why Jesus' teachings and actions were so amazing and astounding. He used his authority, his power to act, in love, connection and healing instead of through fear, avoidance and distrust.

We all encounter times when a moment of decision is presented to us. We often have to make a quick decision about how to respond. Do we respond in love or fear? Fear may be contagious, but so is love. And when more and more of us choose love instead of fear, it helps us feel less alone. We've all had our own moments similar to my story about staring at a newborn child, when we are briefly caught between the fear of "doing the wrong thing" and the desire to act in love. And all of us have at times chosen love. You are not alone in this. The more that we do it the more contagious it can become. And we have each avoided that sick person too. We all have chosen to give in to societal fears.

There will always be prophets and false prophets, but we can know the difference based on who uses their power to act, their authority, in love instead of those who uses it in fear. There will always be sick people in the synagogue, so to speak, and it is up to us to choose to use our authority in love and not in the reasons why our society fears these people and then tells us to avoid them. Fear may be contagious, but so is love. May we all use our authority, our amazing and astounding authority, to act in love to God, in love to the other and in love to ourselves.