

Authority Issues – Judy Cox

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20; Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

My father had authority issues. I say that sadly, lovingly (understanding now some of the situations that shaped him). He didn't like anyone else telling him what to do. It didn't help that he had education, or experience, or both, in many different areas—sometimes he really DID know more than the “experts.” Either way, he might think he did! “Humble” and “teachable,” not so much. But, in the words of the psalmist, Dad also came to know the Lord's *steadfast love and ... faithfulness*, never more than in the last months of his life. Laid very low by terminal cancer, he became newly aware that the Lord truly *regards the lowly*. He was motivated and, I believe, empowered by the Spirit of Jesus to reach out to mend broken relationships in ways beautiful to witness.

During one of my last days with Dad, Mom was reading today's psalm, Psalm 138, aloud to us. Dad asked her to repeat the last verse: *The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands*. In the great comfort he expressed at those words, I realized that change in him. Someone else's purposes for Dad—God's purposes, and the promise of their fulfillment—were not only accepted, but welcomed as comforting. To paraphrase our Epistle text as well, I saw his *outer nature* (physical body AND authority issues) *wasting away*, while his *inner nature* was *being renewed day by day*. I had the privilege of witnessing the good news of Jesus Christ in action, the Lord's *steadfast love and ... faithfulness* at work changing my father, and I will never forget it.

Today's texts show us the One Who has true authority over us, and various human reactions to—authority issues with—this Authoritative One, our Lord. We find Samuel passionately warning the people of Israel against rejecting God's authority. For they are not (or not only) rejecting Samuel's authority. Their excuse may have sounded that way: *You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us*. But God has said to Samuel, *They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me ... forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you*. So Samuel names all *the ways of a king* that will give the Israelites **valid** authority issues with a human king, all the mistreatment and “lording it over them” down that path. He warns that they'll be sorry!—that they'll *cry out* in despair one day *because of your king, whom you have chosen*. (And he also goes beyond the message entrusted to him, misrepresenting God as One Who *will not answer you in that day*. We who've heard the rest of The Story know that's not Who God is. Today's word from the psalmist, in fact, bears witness to the opposite, *On the day I called, you answered me!* Maybe Samuel had some authority issues of his own?) But the Israelites refuse to listen—they know better! They reject God as their king, and Samuel as God's prophet to lead them.

The Gospel according to Mark shows Jesus, from the very beginning, as the One with authority—authority to baptize with the Holy Spirit, authority to teach without quoting others (like the scribes did), authority over *unclean spirits* (whether spiritual or psychological or

physiological), *authority on earth to forgive sins*, authority to set aside purity regulations regarding when and with whom to eat, and authority as *lord even of the sabbath*. Earlier in today's chapter he has even **given** authority, sharing his own with The Twelve.

Here in the last verses of chapter 3, Jesus comes back to his home base, Capernaum. Sure enough, people are having “issues” with his “authority.” Religious leaders show up to challenge it. Some, the Pharisees, have started plotting *to destroy him*. These who should welcome Jesus aren't—aren't acknowledging his authority as God's agent. Now we will see rejection and refusal to accept his authority by other religious insiders, and even close relatives.

Per his normal, around Jesus an eager, needy crowd gathers, to the point that he and the 12 can't even eat. The eager crowd contrasts with Jesus' relatives, who now show up for the first time in this gospel. They sure don't sound like the “spiritually sensitive” Mary of Luke's birth account, or the brother called “The Just” (later the leader of the Jerusalem church). No, Mark shows a family at least doubtful, if not dismissive, of Jesus' authority. The Common English Bible's translation makes it clear: *When his family heard what was happening, they came to take control of him. They were saying, “He's out of his mind!”*

Christian tradition has struggled with this tension between Jesus and his kin. Consider how translators and even other Gospel authors have presented this incident:

- The King James edits out Jesus' family, saying: *When his **friends** heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, “He is beside himself.”* But Mark here indicates Jesus' family, not friends, using both wording and literary structure. (The conflict with family frames, or brackets, this conflict with the scribes; and at the center of a structure called a “chiasm” is the conflict with The Satan, told in a parable.)
- As you may have noticed, our NRSV makes a different assumption, putting the belittling of Jesus in the mouths of others: *When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for **people** were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”* But the most straightforward reading is that the **family** came (to “seize,” or take custody, of him), saying he was *out of his mind*. Do they do so to protect Jesus' reputation and honor?—or the family's? Mark doesn't tell us.
- Finally, the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke, written after Mark's, also include parallel scenes—but omit any hint that Jesus' family said he was crazy.

This particular wording deserves our notice, too. Literally, *they* say he is *standing outside of himself*—for us, “out of his mind” or maybe “beside himself.” Inside information: there's an awful lot of *standing* in the verses to come, followed by an entirely different posture at the end of our passage!

Enter the scribes. Earlier these experts in the Law were compared unfavorably with Jesus and the authority with which he taught. They blasted him for forgiving sins, as assuming authority that was God's alone, and also for eating with sinners. Jesus' family may surprise us with their posture, but by now we expect conflict with these scribes. Even so, the level of their hatred shocks us. Here they actually claim he's colluding with the enemy—Beelzebul, a name from Israelite tradition for a Philistine god that by this time has become a synonym for The Satan, The Accuser.

The Satan prowls the pages of scripture, growing in hostility and power against God. Extreme monotheists, the Hebrews attributed both good and evil to God's agency. The Accuser first appears as an agent of God; in both Job and Zechariah he uncovers the weaknesses of humans to God, supposedly to preserve God's honor. The Satan becomes increasingly hostile and harmful, upsetting the relationship between God and Israel by temptation, by accusation before God, and by interference in Israel's history. Gradually his identity shifts from God's servant to God's competitor, becoming the force of evil in the world; when the Gospel writers show Jesus meeting him in the wilderness, he is no longer working for God at all. He isn't simply testing Jesus' worthiness to be Messiah. He works for himself, trying to persuade Jesus to betray that mission and side with the kingdom of this world. The Synoptic Gospels show it as a showdown between God's rule, as launched by Jesus, and that of The Satan. In Mark in particular, The Satan powers all opposition to Jesus, regardless of who or what the means. So whoever is bringing the charges, whether relatives or scribes, we are to understand The Satan as behind them, manipulating them.

And actually, the charges of the family (mental illness) roughly equate to the scribes' (demon possession), in the culture of Jesus' day! We can argue that the family might be more concerned with "managing" the issue, while the scribes want to condemn Jesus. But Mark doesn't allow us to view the first rejection as any less serious than the second.

Jesus replies to the scribes' charge, using parables. He takes apart their faulty logic: a divided kingdom cannot **stand**; a divided house cannot **stand**. Should The Satan, The Accuser ever rise (literally, **stand up**) against himself, then he wouldn't be able to **stand**! Certainly he IS finished, a strong man being bound and plundered by Jesus the Mightier One, as Mark has shown.

Jesus then lays into the scribes, displaying authority to **name** sin as well as forgive sin. He warns those who charge him with blasphemy, in his forgiving of sins, of their own sinful blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which rejects forgiveness. I love how The Message puts this: *There's nothing done or said that can't be forgiven. But if you persist in your slanders against God's Holy Spirit, you are repudiating the very One Who forgives, sawing off the Branch on which you're sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One Who forgives.*

Jesus warns the scribes from the Temple in Jerusalem of their guilt of an eternal sin. He exercises the authority to pronounce these "authorities" guilty of sin—these "authorities" from the only place in Israel where sins are determined and atoned for! Is the silence in response an indication of the scribes' awareness and conviction? Or will this solidify their hostility? Mark doesn't, yet, tell us.

Cut to the family again. They've arrived on the scene and, notably, are the ones **standing outside** as they seek one they describe as *standing outside himself*.

Now we find a change in postures. Repeatedly, we're told that here those around Jesus are **sitting**.

In response to the message of the family standing outside, Jesus asks, *Who are my mother and my brothers?* This question cuts to the heart of their society, where family is everything. He answers his own question, looking at those sitting around him: *(You all) here are my mother and*

my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother. Don't miss this, one of the most radical statements in the Gospel. It abandons blood-relationships as the key that defines and orders human life, and announces a whole new mode of being family.

Jesus redefines family as those **sitting** around him, those doing the will of God. This—openness to him, learning from him, accepting his authority—is the will of God. Those living out that acceptance in obedient action become his true relatives—his brothers, his sisters, even his mother.

We hear nothing but silence regarding this response as well. Was Jesus' mother stunned and hurt by this new definition? Were the relatives all equally shocked? Or might **this** be the silence of awareness and conviction? Again, Mark doesn't tell us.

So we could sum up this Gospel passage as “postures toward Jesus.” He comes exercising authority on all levels, delivering those captive to evil in all its forms, and redefining proper familial and religious behavior. We can reject his authority, hang on to our “issues”, and “take a stand,” if you will. Like his birth family, we can be doubtful, or even dismissive, of his authority over us. We can try to manage his outrageous claims to authority, which call us to accept and obey, and resist our management. Like the scribes, we can reject his authority, even as it names the danger in which our “stand” leaves us.

Or ... we can take a seat! We too can be drawn to Jesus, to sit with him receptively. We can be with him, attend to him, learn of him. We can live out that humble receptivity in obedient action...and join his true family!

I am my father's daughter. Hear me say that with gratitude AND in confession. By nature and by nurture, I inherit a besetting sin of pride—and isn't that the reality behind all our human authority issues? Like my dad, I deeply desire the Lord's *steadfast love and ... faithfulness* to work in me, and change me—but **now**, not only when my death becomes a close reality. I want my membership in **Jesus'** family to trump that in my birth family, renewing me *day by day* in and into Jesus' likeness, as I so badly need.

From Jesus' own mouth we hear today an invitation to just that. **We** can, by grace, become family—Jesus' brothers, Jesus' sisters. Thanks be to God!

Let's take our seats around Jesus together!