



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Authority”

John 16:12-15

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I continue today a series of one-word-title sermons where I step back from what is going on in our world to look at an underlying issue. To follow my sermons on happiness, order, and freedom I offer this one on *authority*.

Let us pray:

“Holy God, speak your Word with authority so we will hear and obey. Amen.”

From the day we first learned the meaning of “No,” we’ve had to answer “Who is the boss of me?” questions.

Who or what should have rightful authority over my life?

To whom and what do I give too much say?

What is the right use of authority, and how is it abused?

Listen to something Jesus says to his disciples in preparing them for when he will not be with them anymore. He has been

the one they listened to,

the one they woke up during a storm,

the one who taught them God’s Word

and gave them a role model for how to live God’s Word.



Our mission statement is, “[Finding direction by following Jesus.](#)” How do you follow someone you cannot see?

To prepare the disciples for when he is gone, Jesus says something that gives a pastoral twist to the doctrine of the Trinity. “**You have come to know God the Father in me. Well, you will know me through the Holy Spirit.**”

Listen:

¹²“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

“[OK Boomer.](#)”

That’s a phrase Millennials use when responding to what they think are out-of-touch or close-minded opinions expressed by members of my generation, the Baby Boomers. It has been the experience of some Millennials that Boomers are prone to sound like they are entitled to the final say on any issue.

Imagine a Millennial actually saying “[OK Boomer](#)” to a Boomer, and imagine that neither one of them has any humility or sense of humor. It would be an exchange where both are offended:

the Millennial by the Boomer being paternalistic,
and the Boomer by the Millennial being patronizing.

Each has dismissively patted the other on the head.

Now, I’m a Boomer. There are times when I am tempted to defend my generation. Maybe sometimes we Boomers come across to Millennials as so certain in our own opinions because Millennials are perhaps sometimes too certain in theirs.

I think I just gave into the temptation. As fun as arguing for the Home-Team-Generation might be, I can’t do that today. Actually, what I want to do today is admit that generally speaking, the Millennial jab has a *point*. Generalizations about generations are unfair, but some truth can be found in those generalizations.

More than other generations in this century, Baby Boomers have had a rebellious tendency that comes from a sense of knowing better. We saw it when Boomers came into early adulthood with their rebellions against a war and on behalf of rights—civil rights and equal rights—and rebellion against restrictions on personal behavior in regard to sex and recreational drugs. We’ve seen it lately as older Boomers who are actually in positions of power and authority weaken and dismantle their institutions, agencies and long-standing norms. In other words, the tendency of the Boomer generation to rebel

started early and hasn’t ended yet;
has been liberal, conservative, and libertarian;



has had noble and selfish motives;
has accomplished good and destructive things,
and has sometimes reformed
 and sometimes dismantled
 the institutions of family, faith, community and government.

To be honest with you, I sometimes have a hard time finding my place in Boomer world. My greatest role models have always come from my parents' generation, sometimes called "The Greatest Generation," (but that's ignoring their flaws), sometimes called "The GI Generation," (but that's ignoring the women), and sometimes called the "World War II Generation," (but that's militaristic).

Notice that I just did the Boomer thing and obsessed over language assuming there's a better way to say things. I think I'll stick with *The Greatest Generation* today because they were great in building things. They built up so many of the institutions of family, faith, community and government that we take for granted.

So many of that generation wanted to maintain and protect what they built. I respect that. I am passionate about helping to build a staff, program, ministries, a stewardship tradition and endowments to strengthen Second Presbyterian Church so it can stay strong as an institution and offer a witness for many years after I've departed this earth.

But, while I respect those of my parents' generation who sought to protect, I have even greater respect for those in my parents' generation who sought to protect the institutions by reforming them. I think they are the kind of people that many in later generations have a hard time understanding because their passion to reform institutions does not come from wanting institutions to become something that is worthy of their love. Their passion comes from loving already institutions of family, faith, community and country. They have a deep respect for authority, and from that respect came their anger when they see authority abused. They want the best for their families and country which is why they were willing to address the flaws their generation had a hard time facing: sexism and racism.

I can point to role models of these kind of reformers in my biological family *and* my church family. I am the proud son of parents who, while living and working in the deep south, took stands against the Vietnam War and racial segregation, and were accepting of family and friends who were secretly gay
 but who confided in them because they knew they would be accepting.

Yet I'm also the proud son of parents who
 loved living in the deep south with its priority on family and place,
 who are deeply patriotic,
 who are rule-keepers in living by a demanding moral code,
 and who devoted their lives to building up the churches they both served.

Then there are those I admire of that generation in my church family. Maybe I shouldn't focus only on ministers, but I can't help it this week. Dr. Bill Klein and Rev. David Henry were



both mentioned earlier in this service as two people who are now under hospice care and needing our prayers. Bill was my predecessor and David had a long career serving Baptist churches before joining this congregation in retirement. Both
loved the congregations they served,
had clear visions of what the congregations could become,
and used the authority of their offices to build and protect... and to reform... those congregations.

Even when their congregations fell short of their visions, it did not dent their loyalty and devotion to them.

If Millennials and Boomers find each other hard to understand, imagine the difficulty of those of the Greatest Generation who built institutions to protect their families and country understanding how younger people could so easily abandon families, faith communities and love of country over issues that they too see as serious but not as fatal.

They have a healthy respect for authority because life simply will not work unless some kind of authority structure is in place. With their realistic doctrine of sin, there came with their respect for authority a healthy *suspicion* because they know that authority can be abused. Which is why when they led their churches and had authority, they did so with humility. They deflected praise too much because it made them uncomfortable.

I want to keep them in mind as we think about the witness of the Gospel of John.

Before I look specifically at the passage, I want to talk about the Gospel of John as a whole and I'll include a detour into the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of John's perspective on Jesus is cosmic. It is the Gospel's view that through the entire biblical witness we have been creatures who lived in creation, and God has been the Creator whose face could not be seen and whose voice, with few exceptions, was mediated through scripture, Law, experience, the liturgy of priests, the preaching of the prophets, and the letters of the apostles. We of the earth struggled to know the God of Heaven.

That never changed... with one exception. John explains,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
...And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ...No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”

Jesus *makes God known*. In his voice, you hear God's. In his life, you see God at work in the world.

I'll say out loud what some have said about this: “Jesus was a cult leader.” Jesus could get the disciples to believe what he wanted them to believe and do what he wanted them to do because he had them convinced that when he spoke it was with the voice of God.

I'll also say out loud that there have been Christian ministers and congregations that could be called as witnesses to the stand to prove that charge. When Christians are asked to close their



minds to any revelation that doesn't come directly from a literal read of scripture or from the voice of the minister explaining scripture—when they are asked to demonize and dehumanize as God's enemies those the ministers and congregations misunderstood or hated—they seem to make the point.

But I disagree with the charge of Jesus being a cult leader. I am an unapologetic Christian who believes that we know God in a Jesus who lived then and lives now. One reason I believe this is that I don't see Jesus closing minds and hearts.

What I *do* see in the Gospels are disciples who are tempted to close their own minds and hearts. That's easy to do when you're in the presence of someone who you want to do the believing and thinking for you. It is easy to do when you are in the presence of someone who is charismatic, influential and powerful. They have found their purpose and meaning in following this man. They have trusted Jesus to tell them what to believe and what to do. They look to him to be their Savior who will free them from their shackles, whether it be the shackles of Rome or of the shackles of their own failings.

But in the Gospels, Jesus wants none of that kind of blind obedience. He resists becoming the reason for followers to blindly accept and obey without thinking, seeking, doubting, testing and praying.

Here are ways the Gospel of Mark makes my point:

- A storm comes and the disciples want Jesus to save them,
 - and Jesus asks them, “**Have you no faith?**”
- Thousands need to be fed and the disciples want to turn them away,
 - and Jesus again asks them, “**Have you no faith?**”
 - and then asks them, “**What do you have to offer?**”
- Remembering the story of transfiguration, after seeing Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus on top of a mountain, disciples want to build memorials to remember Jesus standing with Moses and Elijah.
 - Jesus wants them instead to study and understand what Moses represents, the Law, and what Elijah represents, the prophets.
- The crowd often wants specifics so they can know what to believe or what to pin on Jesus so as to get him in trouble.
 - Jesus answers with parables that defy definition and invite searching and exploration.

Over and over again, the disciples want proof, they want power, and they want Jesus to lead them simply by telling them what to do. Jesus has no desire to be a worldly king who is blindly followed. He has no desire to be a cult leader who is blindly obeyed. All through his ministry, he resists blind allegiance.

When he is alive and physically among the disciples, the authority he claims is as a teacher, one who opens up to others the deeper meaning of Scripture, and particularly the heart of God's Law. He also *teaches by example* in showing what God's justice and compassion look like. Mark says this most eloquently when Jesus frees a man of his demons, and people respond talking about the



authority of his *teaching*. His authority isn't seen in his power, but in his example of showing compassion.

That said, John's Gospel then makes clear that his authority as a teacher, even as a role model, is not enough. Within the same conversation of our passage which takes place while they are having their last meal together, Jesus says, "I have been your teacher." In other words, Jesus says,

"I have spoken,
 you have listened.
I have taught,
 you have learned.
I have instructed,
 and you obeyed."

But in this last meal, Jesus says that his lasting authority isn't to be as a teacher but as a friend. "You are now my friends," he says. "When I am gone, I am going to trust you to make good judgments about how to be mature people of God. And you're going to justify that trust when you love others as I have loved you."

Then, in encouraging the disciples not to be afraid because they soon will have to be faithful without him, he says what we heard in our passage:

"You won't be alone. My Spirit will be with you. The voice of God that you heard through me, will be a voice within you. No other voice than *that one* is to be your final authority."

The final authority is the voice within.

What a wise... and dangerous... word that is. It is dangerous first because
 oh-my-goodness
 can that oh-so-right-answer
 lead to oh-so-wrong consequences.

It is an easy jump to then say that I am my final court of appeal. I can decide for myself what to believe and what to do. Morality can be reduced to personal preference. I can be my own god. Taken to an extreme, psychiatrists call that narcissism.

What theologians call it is the greatest form of idolatry. They say that when Jesus asks you to listen to the voice within, he is speaking of the voice of the Spirit. He is speaking of the voice of God, heard in his own words and seen in his witness, and speaking still to those who are able to listen over their own voices of pride and shame.

And here's another danger of listening to the voice within. If someone or something—a personality, a code, a social or political agenda—does a good enough god-impersonation, then their voice can get mistaken for the voice within.

We all know it is true. Some of the worst atrocities in history and in lives have been committed in the name of God. Lesser authorities get confused with final authority.



I'll try to be clear about that voice within.
The voice is not me,
 as much as I try to make good judgments.
The voice is not the voice of my parents,
 as much as I admire and trust my parents.
The voice is not a political leader,
 as much as we need good political leaders.
The voice is not the voice of our religious leaders,
 as much as I respect leaders like Bill Klein and David Henry.
The voice is not some code or agenda,
 as much as I need rules to live by
 and as important as issues are to me.

No, the voice is to be God's voice, as heard in Jesus, and as still heard through our informed conscience. The key is consistency and integrity. We have plenty of ways by which we can make judgements about the authenticity of what we think we hear the Spirit telling us.

Ironically, the way we can recognize the voice of final authority is through the instruction of lesser authorities.

I am going to sound old fashioned here because I am going sound again like those in my parents' generation who loved the authorities, traditions and institutions that they loved, and which they often stood against and sought to reform.

Listen to scripture. Yes, scripture being as historically planted as it is often patriarchal, sometimes tribal, sometimes violent, and sometimes out of date with its flat-world-views and its acceptance of cultural norms that are now unacceptable... like slavery. Still, listen to scripture, for there emerges from its witness a vision of justice, peace and reconciliation that calls into question even the vision of individual passages. Scripture interpreting scripture is one of the great Reformed principles of biblical interpretation. Don't listen uncritically to scripture as God but listen for God's voice within the witness of scripture.

Listen to the church. Despite all the dismissal today of churches as institutions, and despite the very poor witness of ministers and congregations who spread their own conspiracy theories and promote their own political agendas as God's agenda, you can see over the history of the church a vision emerge of justice and compassion... a vision that holds accountable even sad chapters of church history, and disappointing congregations. Don't listen uncritically to preachers as gods but listen for God's voice within the witness of church tradition—both its triumphs and its failures.

By the way, let scripture help you see the vision of the church because it is in their alignment that the vision really begins to shine.

Listen to the world. Despite all the sadness of death and disaster that is sometimes found in creation, and despite all the injustice and misery that can sometimes be seen in history and found in communities, there arises a vision of ways we can live that promote decency, justice and peace.

We see examples of integrity as people live by values and virtues,



we see the government leaders who serve the people,
we see jurists who promote justice in their courtrooms,
we see individual acts of compassion and charity offered to the weak
by those with power,
we see the ways neighbors love neighbors and how enemies can reconcile.

By the way, the best witness of scripture and the church can help us see in the world how to live as God's people, for it is when those visions align that the vision shines brightest.

I mentioned the trinity. There is a doctrine of the trinity called Perichoresis, which means "indwelling," where the Father, Son and Spirit are consistent, and the Spirit will not lead us to believe or do anything that is not in keeping with the God of Creation and the Torah, or with the witness of the Son.

So it is with lesser authorities. It is in the alignment and the consistency of their vision that we develop an informed faith. It is how virtues are shaped, values are formed, judgment is refined and a moral conscious is grown. We are given a way to hear the voice of the Spirit that Jesus, as our friend who loves us, wants us to hear. It is the voice that tells us to love others in the way he loves us. That is the voice that has final authority.

Let that voice be the one we hear and obey, even as we show respect for these lesser authorities.

