

By Whose Authority?

“They were astounded at [Jesus’] teaching, for he taught them as one having authority. . . .”
Mark 1:22

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I have spent most of my ordained life as a chaplain in academic settings working with adolescents and young adults. One characteristic that this demographic tends to share is that they love to challenge authority. The transition from childhood to adulthood is in fact largely defined by the rebellion against authority, as young people seek to differentiate themselves from their parents, their peers, their teachers, and the many institutional and cultural voices that seek to tell them what to do with their lives.

Good luck trying to tell a teenager what to wear to school, or to communicate better with mom or dad, or to abide by a curfew on a Saturday night, or to come to church with the family on Sunday. Similarly, when eighteen-year-olds first go off to college, the freedom they experience on campus is exhilarating for most of them, as they no longer are under their parents’ thumbs, and can choose for themselves how late they stay up, whether or when they study, how much they party, who they hang out with, and so on.

Most of us during this time of life are hard-wired to resist being told what to do, to question those who hold power, to assert ourselves, as we begin to explore what it means to have agency in the world, to claim the freedom God has given us as autonomous creatures. This is all as it should be and is a normal part of the developmental process of growing up into mature adults.

When I arrived at Harvard in the fall of 2012 to begin my tenure as one of the University Chaplains, I discovered that Harvard had its own distinctive way of helping young people claim their moral freedom and autonomy. As part of the University’s freshman orientation program, the one text that all arriving students had to read was Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance.” It was for generations of Harvard students, until very recently, a rite of passage for everyone who matriculates there.

If you're not familiar with Emerson's essay, it is a celebration of individual autonomy and freedom of the will. "Nothing is sacred," Emerson writes in his essay, "but the integrity of the human mind." Consequently, he argues, our only reliable guide is individual conscience and intuition. "Trust thyself" is the mantra Emerson repeats throughout his essay, for social pressures and conventions will inevitably seek to control and distort one's natural moral compass.

Deeply suspicious of all forms of social and political life, Emerson extols instead the virtues of solitude, nature, the interior life, and, as the essay's title underscores, complete self-reliance. We would all be much better off, Emerson argues, if men and women returned to relying solely on their own minds, rather than quoting "ancient saints and sages" and deferring to institutions, traditions, and customs.

You can see why college students would gobble Emerson up, as his celebration of human selfhood essentially gives young people license to distrust all forms of authority and instead to be their own guides.

Now, there is much in Emerson that I admire, and his essay on self-reliance is certainly a provocative piece that no doubt deserves to be part of a literate person's education. And to be sure, each of us needs to cultivate our reasoning capacities so as to make thoughtful, critical, and independent decisions about our lives. That said, Emerson's extreme emphasis on individualism and pure self-determination misses something essential about who we are as human beings, and more importantly, *whose* we are.

The Christian faith offers another view of human flourishing. Our faith rests squarely on the conviction that we are created by God for *relationship*, not for solitude; for life in community, not for life in self-reliant isolation; and for obedience to God's loving purposes for His creatures, not just rebelliously committed to the authority of our own whims. From beginning to end, the biblical story focuses on God's design for forming a faithful *people*, a covenant *community*, not merely a collection of individual selves pursuing their own perceived rights.

So, for example, in the beginning God creates Adam and Eve to be *in relationship* with one another and with the natural world. Soon thereafter, God covenants with Abraham and Sarah to bring forth from them a family, a *chosen people*, a people who forever thereafter define themselves in terms of their connection to God and his promises for their future. God then covenants with Moses to liberate this same people from all that enslaves them and leads this people out of the wilderness into a promised land, giving them a set of laws, the

Torah, to bind them together in right relationship. And, as we hear in our first lesson today from Deuteronomy, notwithstanding the Israelites' lapses into idolatry, forgetfulness, and faithlessness, God keeps sending to his people prophetic voices to invite and cajole his people back into covenantal relationship.

And then ultimately, of course, God sends His Son into the world to be for us the living embodiment of right relationship with God and with others. But Jesus is not merely a moral exemplar for us to follow in our individual lives; rather, at the foundation of his ministry is the calling together of a group of disciples, who together become the Body of Christ. We are Christ in community, not alone in our heads as Emerson would have it, and our mission is to be Christ's hands and feet in the world, not just walking in the woods on our own.

And the voice we listen to in guiding our life together is Christ's, the one who speaks and acts with a special *authority*, as our gospel text today repeatedly emphasizes. Today's gospel lesson is in fact all about the question of *authority*. When Jesus appears in the synagogue, Mark tells us, he teaches not like the scribes do, merely reciting traditional formulations of Torah, but rather Jesus instructs with a unique authority. The Greek word is "exousia," which can be translated as either authority or power, but in either case the word conveys something extraordinary.

And so, for example, Jesus demonstrates his authority by confronting the man with the unclean spirit in the synagogue and casting out the demonic force that haunts the poor fellow. In so doing, Jesus' not only evidences his divine power, but he shows that his authority is entirely aligned with and guided by God's good purposes for human flourishing. Jesus heals the man, restoring him to his old self so that he can reconnect with his community and be in healthy relationship once again with family, friends, and himself.

You see, the issue of authority is not just about having power, but more importantly about how one carries or claims the authority one is given. And what is distinctive about Christ's *exousia* is that he uses it only for the benefit of the other: to heal, to cure, to feed, to restore, to mend, to build up, and always with the aim of promoting healthy relationship. Christ never uses his authority for his own gain, or to control or dominate, or to tear apart, or to isolate.

The question for each one of us, then, is whether we are going to live our lives trusting only in ourselves, as Emerson argues, or whether we are willing to place our trust in the loving authority Christ offers?

When my students at Harvard asked me for counsel on this fundamental existential question, it was not Ralph Waldo Emerson I relied upon for an answer, but rather the Danish Lutheran theologian Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was fond of making a distinction between what he calls ‘negative freedom,’ on the one hand, and ‘positive freedom,’ on the other.

Negative freedom is something akin to what Emerson describes: being unfettered by outside constraints and completely at liberty to do what one wants, to follow one’s own will. Positive freedom, by contrast, is the decision to choose to be governed by something beyond one’s self, something transcendent, a higher power, that leads a person into goodness, truth, and wholeness. For Kierkegaard, the religious person freely chooses to yield to God’s will in a spirit of humility, acknowledging that on our own we are not always able to find our way and make good choices, but instead need the guidance of God in Christ.

Speaking for myself, I long ago realized that complete self-reliance is a dangerous myth; that trying to live apart from a community of faith is isolating and lonely; that I am prone to lose my way when left to my own devices; that I need God, just as I need all of you; and that the person of Jesus Christ, and the Body of Christ’s people gathered, gives me the most trustworthy guidance I have ever found. I am not only happy to defer to Christ’s authority, I know that I would be a complete mess without it.

The authority Christ wields, you see, is not that of a demanding and controlling tyrant, seeking to dominate us or waiting for us to make a mistake so that he can judge us. No, the authority Christ embodies is more like the authority of a mother who grabs her daughter’s hand as she is crossing the road, so as to protect her from the perils of oncoming traffic and guide her safely to the other side.

This is the kind of loving authority that Jesus showed to that man possessed by an unclean spirit in the synagogue so long ago. And this is the same kind of loving authority to which—to *whom*—I am more than willing to pledge my heart.