

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Apr 16th 2015

These readings today from Acts and John caused me to think about authority, and that can be a very tricky subject to wade into. What is authority and where does it come from? How do we recognize it? What examples of authority should we follow?

In Acts 5, we see a tension between the religious authorities who were used to operating in a structure that granted them power and control, and the apostles who were teaching and healing in the name of Jesus, seemingly with an authority that was unexplainable and certainly not authorized by the “powers that be.” Maybe people didn’t understand where this authority came from, but they certainly recognized it when they saw it. Isn’t it the same with us? We see people in positions of power, but often their pronouncements and their actions ring hollow; we also see people who have no position or prestige, yet their way of speaking, acting, and being can affect us in very powerful ways.

This tension is one that I think we feel often, from a wide variety of authority figures. Pope Francis even spoke about it in his Christmas message to Vatican officials this past winter, warning those ecclesiastical authorities not to get into a way of proceeding where the position becomes the most important thing:

This is the disease of persons who insatiably try to accumulate power and to this end are ready to slander, defame and discredit others, even in newspapers and magazines. Naturally, so as to put themselves on display and to show that they are more capable than others. This disease does great harm to the Body because it leads persons to justify the use of any means whatsoever to attain their goal, often in the name of justice and transparency!

Those who are put into positions of authority (politicians, CEOs, and even clergy and ministers) can and do sometimes get confused or turned around and make decisions based on power, money, or position. In these cases, the “authority” they think they are exercising doesn’t seem to carry much weight. So our task is to sort out where legitimate and inspiring authority comes from and seek to follow it in our own lives.

Who has authority in my life? Those whose influence comes only from titles and appointments and positions? Or those who are close to the God who hears the cry of the just, and is close to the brokenhearted and those who are crushed in spirit? Which examples of authority pull me at my core and inspire me to do good in the world? That is real authority, the one that we are called to follow. It may be unsanctioned and unauthorized by those accustomed to wielding influence, but it certainly has

authenticity and the power to inspire us to become more Christ-like.

Craig Zimmer - Creighton University's Campus Ministry