

Who is the Author of Your Life?
Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28
February 1, 2009

All of us have our favorite authors who captivate our attention, draw us into their plot, and offer the thrill of adventure. You undoubtedly have authors and books you recommend to others, authors who bring characters to life and books that are well-written. Perhaps they are writers who have inspired you to change a behavior or guided you into new directions. We undoubtedly turn to some authors to influence our opinions on issues. Who are some of your favorite authors?

Authors have the awesome privilege of participating in the creative act. Writers of fiction have the profound joy of shaping characters and molding personalities. Biographers don't have the same artistic prerogative, for they are given a subject to describe. However, I imagine that on occasion their subjects protest that descriptions are not quite accurate and they wish their images to be enhanced!!

In this morning's gospel reading, the people who hear Jesus' teaching in the synagogue are amazed by his authority. Authority is the power to influence or command thoughts, opinions, or behavior. Sometimes authority is conferred by an office or position, such as president, mayor, principal, or law enforcement officer. Jesus does not hold an office that bestows power upon him. He is a traveling rabbi with a rag-tag group of followers who go from town to town to teach whoever will listen. He does not have an established rabbinic school in a major city in Palestine.

The authority that people experience in Jesus is an inner force. The source of Jesus' authority is his personal relationship with God. God invests Jesus with a power to influence the thoughts, opinions, and actions of people. God is the Author of Jesus' life.

We first learn this at Jesus' baptism when he is filled with the Holy Spirit and God names Jesus as God's beloved Son, with whom God is well pleased. God seeks the privilege of writing Jesus' life. Jesus willingly surrenders the right of authorship to God.

As Paul so beautifully expresses, Jesus empties himself, becoming a blank canvas upon which God paints a divine design. In Jesus, God composes a life unlike any other, written with holy ink. People recognize the difference in this man's life and are attracted to him.

The people who encounter Jesus in the synagogue on this Sabbath day have been deeply influenced by the scribes. Scribes are religious leaders trained in interpreting religious law, especially the Law of Moses. The scribes derive their authority from religious Law. The law is meant to make life holy by imposing limitations.

Some unfortunate lives are controlled by what Mark calls “unclean spirits.” These are forces that seek to destroy life. We can’t be exactly certain what “unclean spirits” are, but we might imagine them to be mental or physical illnesses which were misunderstood, or the impact of some kind of brokenness or abuse. Whatever the source, it was not positive, and it created great dis-ease within the individual, who sought to hurt and even destroy others.

Here upon his first sermon Jesus finds himself confronted by two powerful forces that try to sabotage the creative, caring work of God to which he is called. Through the law the scribes seek to limit the abundant life God has given humans, while the unclean spirits seek to destroy life, making people miserable.

Jesus comes preaching the good news that the reign of God is at hand. In this new regime life is freely given to all and wholeness is restored to those who are broken. Jesus’ “good news” is bad news for the unclean spirits. The Life-Giver named Jesus threatens to destroy them, to put them out of business. They recognize the challenge he presents. The power struggle between good and evil, truth and falsehood, life and death intensifies.

We humans know about power struggles. We like to claim control of our lives, and if possible, the lives of others. We seek to claim power whenever we can.

The following conversation involved a U.S. Navy ship off the coast of Newfoundland.

“Please divert your course 15 degrees to avert a collision.”

“Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees.”

“This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again: Divert your course.”

“No, I say again: Divert YOUR course.”

“This is an aircraft carrier of the United States Navy. We are a large warship. Divert your course at once!”

“This is a lighthouse. Your call.”

We humans are mightily reluctant to release power and to submit to another authority.

Jesus offers a model of using authority not to control or destroy others, but to liberate and free them from whatever binds them. He never forces his will upon others, but he offers an alternative way of being. While the scribes restricted people by the law, Jesus frees people using grace. Instead of imprisoning them in unnecessary regulations, Jesus uplifts people by offering life, joy, peace, and well-being. Jesus uses his authority for people, not against them. He uses his power for deliverance, not for domination.

Jesus operates this way because God is the Author of his life. His close relationship to the Creator of all life inspires Jesus to be creative in thought and

act. His connection to the One whose word speaks reality into being enables his words to match his actions with seamless consistency. He is so filled with God's Spirit that his very presence exudes a life-giving power.

What does this scripture mean for us and for our lives? Who is the Author of our lives? Who or what is the most powerful influence upon our thoughts, words, and actions? There are many voices competing for our attention these days. We are deeply influenced by the media, our peers, and the government. We must carefully discern which voices are of God and which voices are not of God. We must carefully distinguish between unclean spirits and the Holy Spirit. We must filter what we allow to shape our own thoughts, opinions, and deeds.

The economic crisis faced by our nation impacts each of us as individuals. It is a time to evaluate our priorities and values. Have we become so enamored of luxury items that we now consider them necessities? Have we grown accustomed to a standard of living built around consumerism or faithful living?

Joe Paterno established a legendary record as a football coach at Penn State University. He tells how in 1972, just five years after coming to the post, he received a phone call from the New England Patriots National Football League Franchise, asking him to come as their head coach. Paterno said he wasn't interested, but then the offer was sweetened with a \$1.3 million contract, part ownership in the franchise, and a \$300,000 bonus for signing. At the time Paterno was earning \$35,000 a year at Penn State. How could he refuse? He had to take the offer.

That night Paterno says he lay awake most of the night. He thought about his family and the home they enjoyed so much. He thought about the university and about each of his "thick necked, fragile-hearted" players, one by one. Why had he said he would go to Boston? He knew the answer: it was the money and the prestige.

The next morning Paterno said to his wife, "Honey, last night you went to bed with a millionaire, but this morning you woke up with me! I'm not going." He added, "From the moment of that nighttime revelation, I knew what college football meant to me and what pro football could never mean. I love winning games as much as any coach does, but I know there's something that counts more than victory or defeat. I get to watch my players grow up—in their personal discipline, in their educational development, and as human beings. I would not trade that lasting reward for anything."ⁱ

Joe Paterno refused to allow money and prestige to have authority over his life. He had deeper values and commitments that directed his decisions. He continues to serve Penn State for nearly 60 years, 43 of them as head coach.

Permitting Jesus to be the Author of our lives is not necessarily a popular decision in our unchurched culture. We may find ourselves doing things outside the mainstream of society because our Christian values lead us in different directions. Like Jesus, we may find ourselves in conflict with others because we operate out of a Christian perspective.

There is a danger that we become too smug in our faith life. We can become confident that we are so closely connected to Jesus that our lives, actions, and thoughts have the seamless consistency that Jesus did with God. We deceive ourselves into believing that our values and opinions are those of Jesus. We fail to start with Jesus, allowing him to be the Author of our lives.

Jesus gave two instructions to the unclean spirit: Be silent and come out of the man. These are two commands for us to follow as we strive to make Jesus the Author of our lives.

We must be silent. We must stop the ceaseless flow of competing voices in our hearts and minds so that we can be attentive to the one still small voice of God. We must be silent so that we might hear the next steps in the divine drama being written by Jesus.

We must release those “unclean spirits” within. Let go of attitudes, feelings, and biases that are not of God. Like Jesus, we must be emptied, so that we can be filled with the Spirit of God.

Listening to God and empty of ourselves, we are ripe and ready to permit God to be the Author of our lives. In this way, like Jesus, we will be gifted with an authority that has the power to give, not destroy, life.

May we be silent enough to listen to God and empty enough to allow the Spirit of God to compose our lives.

Guiding God, we are grateful for your leading nudges throughout life. Arouse our awareness of your still small voice among many, that we might allow you to be the primary influence in our lives. Where we have fallen into unhealthy patterns, set us upon the right course. Engrave your Word upon our hearts that we might faithfully follow you in all our ways.

Grant your guidance to all leaders granted authority, that they might seize the power granted them to benefit the common good. We seek your wisdom and courage as we move through these difficult economic times.

We are mindful, O God, of many who are struggling. We pray for those overwhelmed by financial debt; for those suffering from freezing weather; for veterans enduring trauma as a result of their service. We pray for those seeking to overcome their own weaknesses and limitations. Surround youth and children with healthy environments in which they can thrive. Abide with those who are ill, blessing them with your healing touch.

We place ourselves under the guiding authority of Jesus Christ. May your Word as expressed in his life and ministry be our compass for daily living. In his name we pray. Amen.

For Your Personal Worship through the Week

- List “unclean spirits” that haunt your inner being – attitudes, behaviors, prejudices which are not of God. From which “evil forces” do you need to be liberated in order to live the abundant life Jesus offers?
- As you move through the week, pay attention to the voices that influence you. Who is on the “committee in your head” that guides you?
- Use a breath prayer to help you be still and listen to God. Breathe deep and slowly. As you inhale, pray “Speak, Lord.” As you exhale, pray, “Your servant is listening.” Continue the prayer for several minutes, returning to the words of the prayer when your mind wanders. Repetition of the prayer will help you focus and sense the presence of God.

“Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.”

- Read the following scriptures in preparation for our communal worship on Sunday, February 8:

Isaiah 40:21-31

I Corinthians 9:16-23

Mark 1:29-39

As you read, notice any verses or phrases that particularly strike you. Write the phrase in your journal. Meditate on the phrase in prayer. Why does it speak to you at this time? What message is God giving to you?

ⁱ Rev. Don Shelby, First United Methodist Church, Santa Monica.