**Why Jesus' Authority is Different**

**Matthew 8:1-13 Tim Dickau July 16th, 2017**

**A Stolen Life**

In the book A **Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman**, co-written with the acclaimed author, Rudy Wiebe, Yvonne Johnson tells the story of her tragic life of abuse and neglect. Under the influence of alcohol, a fight broke out between several people in her home in 1993. On that day, a man that her cousin accused of being a child molester ended up dead. Johnson was very protective of her young children and was originally trying to protect their welfare. The trial revealed that it was very likely that the two men present who raped this man also killed him. Yet while the two Caucasian men with Yvonne received sentences of less than 10 years, she was sentenced to 25 years without parole. The story hits close to home for me because it took place in Wetaskiwin, Alberta, the city where I grew up. It's a story that exposes the endemic racism I grew up with, the ongoing fall-out of residential schools and the abuse of power and authority.

**Suspicion of Authority**

A cheery little story to begin the sermon. The reason I've told you this gruesome story is that it illustrates multiple examples of how authority was misused or abused. In this case, authority was misused or abused by the courts, by the state in residential schools and by Yvonne's grandfather and father and brother who all raped her. It's a heartbreaking story.

And it's only one of many like it. I don't think that I have to convince anyone of you that power and authority are often misused or abused. Many of you have experienced this reality at work yourselves with a superior, some of you at school, and sadly some of you at the hands of someone you trusted deeply, a reality for so many women or men who have been sexually abused. On a larger scale, we see this misuse and abuse of authority across all sectors of society by some of our political, business, educational, non-profit and even church leaders. When people describe our age as a society, they often describe it as one that is marked by ***suspicion*** of authority, an erosion of trust in both leaders and institutions. This neighborhood drips with suspicion. And with good reason. Because trust has often been broken. We have good reasons to be suspicious of much authority.

What experiences, personally or in our world, have made you most suspicious of authority? Can you name some of these in one word or sentence? I think being aware of these experiences is the first step to differentiating between good and bad uses of authority.

**What Do We Do With Jesus' Authority?**

I'm reminding you of this societal suspicion of authority because the passage we read today is all about authority, Jesus' authority. The claim of these two stories we just heard, indeed the claim of this chapter and a key theme of Matthew's entire gospel is that Jesus is a person with authority. With much authority.

And herein lies the tension. What do we do with Jesus' authority living in this culture of suspicion towards authority? Indeed, what I want to ask you to reflect upon today is your own response to Jesus' authority, and our response as a community. What are the fears or concerns or barriers that emerge when meet the authority of Jesus? I know I feel resistance to Jesus' authority sometimes too. What are some reasons for that resistance? And why would we accept Jesus' authority in our lives? Isn't that one of the common critiques of religion, that it leads to people giving over their own authority to someone else? I invite you to reflect on these questions this morning as we explore the character of Jesus' authority.

**Without a Position of Authority**

To begin today, I want to notice two distinctive characteristics of Jesus' authority, two significant ways that his authority differs from so many other authorities and powers in our world. First off, Jesus' authority differs from other authorities in that he has no official position. Which is interesting when you think about the way we use the words power and authority. Generally, we use the word power to describe the exercise of influence. We use the word authority in a similar way except with the slight difference that it is power related to a particular position or reality. Now here's the thing: Jesus had no official ***position*** of authority. He had no political office, no income to speak of, no PhD from Jerusalem university, not even a place to call home. Unlike the judge in that trial for Yvonne Johnson, Jesus has no official position.

Yet Jesus is known as a person with ***much*** authority. This is a key theme in Matthew's entire gospel. For example, in the previous chapter at the end of this block of Jesus' teaching known as the sermon on the mountain, Matthew writes these words: "When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law." Then in this chapter alone, we have stories where Jesus exercises authority first over leprosy, then over the illness, then over the wind and waves, and finally over spiritual forces of destruction. Later in the chapter, Matthew tells us about the crowds response to this authority. He writes: "The people were amazed and asked, “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!” Finally, at the end of Matthew's gospel, after Jesus has willingly gone to Jerusalem to give his life for his people and for the world, after he has risen from the death in victory over this final power, Jesus says these stunning words. "***All authority*** in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Now, go and make disciples of all nations."

We get it. Mathew leaves little doubt about it. Jesus was known as one with authority, he claims to have authority above all others, but it is an authority that is not based on an official position. Rather it is an authority based on his power to heal and transform.

**Authority to Heal and Restore**

That's the second feature of Jesus' authority that marks out Jesus' authority as distinctive and different. I want to focus upon this feature now by looking at these two stories we heard earlier. What does Jesus use this power and authority for?

***Jesus and the Leper***

In both of these stories, Jesus takes actions that leave the crowds staring in wonder and amazement. The first story is a about a man with leprosy. Leprosy was a broad name for all sorts of skin diseases. Like the early days of HIV, many people thought leprosy was highly contagious, which it usually wasn't, but it left leprosy sufferers isolated. People would have avoided this man. Which is why Jesus' actions are so surprising. When this man kneels down before Jesus, Jesus doesn't move away from him. Instead Jesus reaches out and touches him. I imagine that Jesus' action both shocked this man and sent shudders through the crowd. Can you imagine what it would be like after years of being avoided, untouched to have someone reach out to touch you? What a wave of emotion must have shot through the man's body?

And what happens after Jesus touches the man must have been even more surprising. Instead of Jesus becoming infected with the man's leprosy, the man becomes infected with Jesus' wholeness. We see this time and again in the gospels, whether it is with people who are unclean, ill or dead. Jesus takes on their uncleanness, their sickness, even their death, and with it, their shame, and he offers back health, life and dignity.

After Jesus heals the man, he tells him to go show himself to the priest, sort of like going to a doctor today to get a bill of good health, in order to prove that he is healed. The priest's affirmation would have been the door to being reintegrated back into society. The story reveals how Jesus' authority brings both physical and social healing. Both ostracism from without and shame from within are removed. Jesus uses his authority to restore this man to himself and his community.

**The Power of Shame**

Three weeks ago, we had the gift of having three guests here who spoke during our worship. If you weren't here, it is well worth it to find that sermon on our website and listen to it. Someone told me it was my best sermon all year, which I agreed with but wasn't quite sure what to make of since I spoke for about 7 minutes. A lesson there. One of the people we heard from was Barbara Mutch who spoke about shame. She suggested that shame is the primary barrier that prevents us from in Thomas Keating's words "consenting to the love of God". I know shame is a big because it comes up so often in my pastoral conversations, usually without words, instead in a slumped posture, a downward glance, tears. And I don't need to talk to you to know the power of shame; I know the power shame has had in my own life at times. Shame can be a slippery feeling to get a handle on too. It's not always simple to know why we feel shame. Yes, we can feel shame because of what we have done but so often shame is the result of what has been done or said to us, or just because of where our lives have ended up or not ended up. Yvonne Johnson carried deep shame for the abuse ***done to her.*** And that's the thing. Often shame is the result of what someone ***in authority*** has said or done to us, whether it is being chastised by your boss without cause, or being neglected by a parent.

So when we come to Jesus, to one who has authority, it's no wonder that we sometimes feel resistant, isn't it?

If shame causes you to resist Jesus' authority, what I want you to notice clearly today is that Jesus neither avoids nor pushes down this man who knew shame. Instead, he reaches out to touch him, to heal him, to restore him, to re-establish his dignity and value, to restore him to relationship. If you find yourself carrying shame, you don't need to fear that Jesus will reinforce that shame. Instead, Jesus offers to remove it.

The church fathers and mothers of the first 500 years of the church often wrote about God's simplicity. By that they didn't mean that God is without mystery but rather that God is not divided like we are. Do you feel that division within yourself at times, being pulled this way and then that in an ethical situation? Paul described it this way: **"**I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." Divided. God isn't like that. God is undivided, if indeed God is like Jesus. Read the gospels for yourselves. Jesus always lifts up the downtrodden, always restores the shamed who kneel before him. Jesus is undivided, consistent.

If you are carrying shame that keeps you from consenting to God's love, I am going to invite you as you come to communion to let Christ take your shame upon himself and to receive from him dignity and wholeness in the bread and cup, his body and blood. In a moment, I will give you some silence to reflect upon any ways in which shame is holding you back from "consenting to God's love". Don't leave today carrying shame with you out the door. There is a way out of shame available today.

***Jesus and the Centurion***

The next story reinforces and augments how Jesus uses his authority. It is a story of a Roman Centurion, a military leader. This man too is one who would be avoided in Jewish culture, but for a different reason. He was a man who represented oppressive power, the kind that could get you beaten if you couldn't pay your tax, or killed if he perceived you as a trouble maker, the kind of authority that made you nervous just by his presence. This is a man with authority, but it wasn't generally a benevolent authority. It's the kind of person whose authority makes you squirm with discomfort.

Yet what is surprising is that this man approaches Jesus --this man without any official authority -- and asks him for help. The centurion readily acknowledges Jesus' authority. Indeed, this man has so much confidence in Jesus' authority, specifically in his authority to heal, that he says to him: "But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.”

Jesus is amazed by this man's faith and trust in him. Notice his response:  “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. **11**I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. **12**But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

What does Jesus mean by this unusual statement? Within the Old Testament again and again, we find this narrative claim that when Israel's God becomes king, all the nations will get in on it. Sometimes that will mean judgment, but sometimes it means blessing, as it does here but here in Jesus' words. In saying that many will come from East and West to take their place at the feast, Jesus echoes promises in the Psalms and prophets usually reserved for the exiles of Israel but now transferred to people of all nations. These moments in Jesus' ministry in the gospels where Jesus welcomes non-Jews are pointers to the worldwide mission of God to reconcile all people to God's own self and to one another following Jesus' victory over death.

But there is another side to this widening storyline of blessing. Those in Israel who reject this narrative, those who ignore this call to repent and to embrace of God's return as King in Jesus, would find themselves on the outside looking in. They would be left behind as this new community with people from all nations and all walks of life was forming. What's worse, if they refused Jesus` way of peace, they would find themselves in danger of this upcoming destruction Jesus foresaw for Jerusalem; they would find themselves in a heap of trouble, a heap of rubble.

**Another Reason for Resisting Jesus' Authority**

Jesus' response points to another reason we might resist Jesus' authority. That resistance that arises within us when he calls us to share in the way of peace and the call of God in way that we are not ready to do, or don't want to do. Think of some of the ways Jesus' words in Matthew's gospel that challenge our cultural practices. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" or "If you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." Or "You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." or "Don't neglect the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness."

Do you feel any resistance to those? I'd be worried if you didn't feel some; these are counter-cultural costly acts.

Yet it is here at this place of resistance that we are invited to discover how Jesus' authority can set us free. Take just one of these examples. Forgiving those who wrong us. Forgiving does require releasing the one who has wronged us from their debt against us. It means giving up resentment and hatred. But in so doing, it also free us up from the tight grip this person has upon us so that we can live in freedom again. I witnessed this freedom most vividly in my Aunt and Uncle Audrey and Charles who made the costly decision to forgive the man who shot their only son at 19 years of age. That wrongful loss could have enslaved them in bitterness for their whole lives. Instead, they visited this man in prison and offered him forgiveness. That act freed them to become people whom I experience as an embodiment of grace. Jesus uses his authority to heal, to restore, to bring light, and to free. This is a different kind of authority.

Is there a place where you are resisting Jesus' authority? Out of either shame or fear of the cost? Take a moment to invite the Spirit to reveal any places of resistance that we can bring to Jesus today. (silence) In a moment, I am going to invite you to bring these places of resistance to Jesus at the table.

**How Jesus' Authority Can Empower You**

Jesus uses his authority to heal, to restore, to bring light, and to free. That's why we can accept it willingly, without shame or resistance. Here's another reason why responding willingly to Jesus' authority is so vital for us. Submitting to Jesus' authority empowers those who follow him to themselves become agents of God's healing and freeing mission to the world. Submitting to Jesus' authority connects you to the one who has overcome the powers of evil and death and gives you power, power to resist the ways of death and to work for what is true and good and just. This is what we have learned and experienced as a community over the years.

Story: Just one example of so many in our community. King Mong Chan has from the time of his social work practicum a number of years ago become an advocate for the many seniors he has come to know in China town. He has also worked for the last years to empower these residents, many whose English is limited, to have a voice in the developments in their neighbourhood, especially the development at 105 keefer. Now I know that King Mong holds down a couple of other jobs in part to support this ongoing work he is doing in Strathcona, resisting the call to just looking for the highest paying job so he can get to do this grassroots work of seeking care and justice for a group of people who could easily become displaced in rapid gentrification and development. Recently Kingmong and others from our church like Chris and Joyce spoke at City hall arguing for more collaborate development at 105 Keefer that respects the needs of Chinese seniors. Ask Kingmong more about his work there. We are grateful for your work, King Mong

This is the very sort of resistance and courage that Jesus' authority over powers that push others down gives us. There are so many more examples we've seen of how Jesus' authority empowers us to resist pressures and forces that suck life away and to work for healing, restoration and freedom.

The authority of Jesus has given us a place to resist the idea that people with barriers to employment are "useless" and instead to develop opportunities where people's gifts can emerge.

The authority of Jesus has given us a place to resist the idea that most refugees are dangerous and to open up homes and a pathway to safety and opportunity here in Canada.

The authority of Jesus has given us a place to resist those authorities who would pull us towards pursuing our own financial well-being alone to instead include others

The authority of Jesus has given us a place to resist treating our homes as private enclaves to become instead places of hospitality and community.

The authority of Jesus has given us a place to resist unhealthy culture in our workplaces and to struggle amidst complexities towards more just business, health or education practices.

Here's the thing: We have to decide. Life is not a game where you can sit back on the fence. Either we submit to the authority of divine love or we will submit to the authorities that pull us towards greed or indifference.

Jesus' authority will one day be made visible to all when God takes creation through death to resurrection. When that day comes, will you be surprised, ashamed? Or will you be grateful that you willingly embraced the authority of the One who restores and heals long ago?