

Matthew 28:16-20
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When I was in high school, I loved watching reruns of the television series MASH. I must admit that I had a little crush on Alan Alda, whose character was Captain Hawkeye Pierce. More than being good-looking, he was funny, and I have a soft spot for guys with a sense of humor.

I especially enjoyed the banter between Hawkeye and Major Frank Burns that revolved around Hawkeye's lack of respect for authority. Frank was the kind of guy who enjoyed outranking other people, regularly "pulling rank" to flex his power muscles. To be fair, Hawkeye had a general disdain for all authority, especially Army authority, not just Frank's. Hawkeye was often out of uniform, a behavior for which he was consistently reprimanded by Frank. Of course, Hawkeye ignored the reprimands or straight-up made fun of Frank in response. At different times in the series, people pointed out that Hawkeye's lack of respect for authority was keeping him from being promoted, to which he reminded them that he wanted nothing to do with that kind of authority, an attitude others, especially Frank, did not understand. I mean...who doesn't want the opportunity to boss other people around?

There are probably some of us in this room who feel the same way about authority as Hawkeye did. As a child, it was not unusual for me to buck up against authority by responding, "You are not the boss of me," to people who, in fact, were the boss of me. It was not unusual for my mom to tell me to do something, like clean up my room, and for me to say, "I will, but you aren't the boss of me." You see, I learned that I could proclaim she wasn't the boss of me all I wanted to if I did what she told me to do. Because of my desire not to be bossed around, the reverse psychology of telling me not to do something to get me to do it worked well on me. And my brother, two years older and generally craftier than me, figured that out long before I did. "Do not change that TV to channel 6." Predictably, I would change the TV to channel 6, and we would watch what my brother wanted to watch all along.

Authority is tricky. Most of us don't mind people having authority if they don't abuse it. And if they have earned it. And if they use their authority in ways that honor what or who has been entrusted to their care. That's a lot of "ifs." We all have encountered people who use authority as a weapon. It is no wonder authority has gotten a bad wrap.

In today's text, Jesus talks to the disciples about authority, so this is a good opportunity to talk about the authority Jesus had and the authority we have as followers of Jesus in this time and place. This is Matthew 28: 16-20

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted. 18 And

Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

This story encompasses the last five verses in the Gospel of Matthew, which I think is notable. These are the author’s final words to his audience. This is the message he left with his first audience and with readers ever since. Following the resurrection story, the author of the Gospel of Mark focused on the empty tomb and the fear of the first witnesses; the author of Luke on the appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples, his ascension, and their preparation as witnesses; and the author of John on a series of appearances of the resurrected Christ, especially to Peter. We talked about one of those last week in the story of the disciples returning to fishing for fish. The author of Matthew focuses his post-resurrection story on Jesus commissioning the disciples for a mission, a mission to invite everyone to follow the ways of Jesus, to go and make disciples of all nations.

This final story weaves together many of the most important themes and symbols of the Gospel of Matthew. The setting is an unnamed mountain, which the author has used many times before as a place in which God’s presence and authority are revealed (28:16, cf. 4:8, 5:1, 14:23, 15:29, 17:1). In addition, the idea of authority (it’s nature, source, and impacts) has been a frequent topic in this Gospel (7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8; 10:1; 21:23, 24, 27). The phrase, “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” that Jesus says in this text recalls a scene in the book of Daniel. Daniel, from a literary perspective, is categorized as an apocalyptic writing and therefore contains a lot of symbolism. In chapter 7, verses 13 and 14, a human being (called the Son of Man) represents the persecuted people of Israel and is given authority by God. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is also called the Son of Man and, like the Son of Man in Daniel, receives authority from God.

It is important to note that this is not Frank Burns’ kind of authority that demands submission. Professor Emeritus of New Testament Interpretation at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary, Osvaldo Vena, describes the kind of authority Jesus was given as “an authority that empowers and liberates.”¹

Vena goes on to say that “in Matthew, the word authority (Greek: *exusia*) is always used in connection with Jesus’ acts of healing and forgiveness.” Jesus’ teaching and doing are celebrated because he is acting with authority but not authoritatively.² God did not give Jesus the authority to oppress and recklessly wield power over God’s people. Jesus was given the authority to act as God’s representative in the world, to

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity/commentary-on-matthew-2816-20-9>, accessed 4/10/24.

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity/commentary-on-matthew-2816-20-9>, accessed 4/11/24.

heal, forgive, love, and care for God's people. And he is there, meeting his disciples on top of the mountain, to send them into the world empowered by that same authority.

And their reaction? The disciples both worshiped and doubted. "Yay, Jesus...we love you...and also, this can't be you; this can't be real; this is impossible." I don't know about you, but to me, this tracks. Among these disciples there is both celebration and uncertainty, both devotion and hesitancy. We'd like to think those first followers had it all together. We'd like to imagine that they would be all in, at least at that moment. But it turns out those first followers were a lot like us, a mixture of faith and doubt, a combination of we are all in and are we sure this is the right thing?

And then how does Jesus respond to this mixed group of worshipers and doubters? He treats all the kids the same. He gives them all the same commission: "Go and make disciples." The command to "go" is what brought these disciples to that mountain to meet Jesus, and the command to "go" is what will take these disciples out to others. One might have expected Jesus to do something else, like calling for the uncertain to sort themselves out and for the hesitant to find their courage. But instead, Jesus kept it simple, "Do what you've seen me do." Once again, these followers of Jesus are being called into the unknown with no guarantee that it will go well.

We have to wonder whether it's a good idea to have this group of disciples who do not all have their act together going out to make other disciples. Maybe Jesus should have been more selective in who he called and sent. I feel like we say this a lot about God things. From the beginning, human beings, created in the image of God, are called to be reflections of God in this world. And over and over, humans have messed it up. It seems risky on God's part to give us any authority, let alone the authority to represent the Holy in this world.

This week, I read a story a commentator wrote about this text, and it struck me as something I wanted to remember. Dr. Craig Koester of Luther Seminary wrote, "When I was in college, a professor made some comments in one of my religion classes that prompted me to ask what he meant by the word "authority." Perhaps it was one of those attempts by a college sophomore to press a point in a manner that sounded profound. Perhaps it reflected a genuine desire to grasp something that I had not fully understood. But the professor responded with a single word that brought a level of clarity I have never forgotten.

He said, "Authority is followability." Followability. He probably coined the word on the spot, but it did what it needed to do. True authority is what gives people the confidence to follow. And this is what Jesus says about himself."³

No one, including Jesus, can make anyone follow Jesus. So, why do we choose to follow Jesus? I asked folks on social media to answer that question, and here is what I

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/the-holy-trinity/commentary-on-matthew-2816-20-2>, accessed 4/11/24.

learned. Time doesn't permit sharing all of them. I received some responses on the original post and some privately.

I chose to follow Jesus's ways because, as the song goes, Love Is the Answer. I'd rather be on the side of love than the side of hate and I feel that by following Jesus's example it is my job to *show* that to people by my good deeds, not to tell them.

It seems to me that following the ways of Jesus can only help to make the world a better place, even if it's hard at the time or if you don't see changes immediately.

Because he is everything I hope to be as a friend, a family member, an advocate, and a human.

It is about being called to serve.

Because Truth, Justice, and Love are stronger than lies, inequality and hate...

Jesus, the carpenter, was the original humanist.

Freedom from the bondages of self.

Jesus provides the blueprint for working for justice for ALL with compassion, courage, and love.

The way of Jesus the Christ is love and compassion.

Love always wins. That's how I want to live and serve.

I am learning about the teachings and example of Jesus because I am lost.

The best teacher ever!

Jesus equals love in its most pure form.

Jesus' entire message was to love, advocate, and care for one another, which is what drives my life.

I follow Jesus because I was loved into it.

So, what makes Jesus followable? It isn't a title. It isn't how much money he had. It isn't how loud he talked or how quickly he passed along an insult. It isn't because he was the smartest, fastest, funniest, prettiest person in the room. We follow Jesus because his ways give us hope that the world can be a kinder, more just, more loving

place. We follow Jesus because he was really good at loving, and he was so good at seeing divinity in the planet and in the other creatures and human beings we share it with. We follow Jesus because we want to believe that the upside-down sacred world he talked about is possible, but we have to bring it about by choosing love every day. That day on the mountain, Jesus gave the disciples the authority to choose a life that is rooted in Love and Hope and to teach other people to be that. Being a Christian, making disciples of all the nations, isn't about forcing other people to believe what we believe. It is not about forcing others to submit to whatever we want or think. Being a Christian is about living into the authority that has been passed along to us, the authority to bring healing, justice, forgiveness, peace, love, and hope to the world. When we do that, we are following Jesus' ways.

I will end this morning with words written by author Jim Palmer, the founder of The Religion Free Bible Project.

Jesus spoke to them, saying it was time for him to leave. His friends were distraught upon hearing this news. They said in disbelief, "You cannot go, Jesus. How shall we carry on without you?"

Jesus replied, "You must find me in yourself."

"How is that possible?", one said. "Will you step inside us, and live your life there?"

Jesus explained, "The life you have seen in, as, and through me is also your life. We share in that one life together. If I stay longer you will become convinced that this is about me, and miss the life I am referring to, which is also in, as, and through you."

After a few moments of silence, one of them asked Jesus, "But should we not elevate you to the highest place among men and worship you?"

"Only do as I did, and heed that life and spirit that is within you. Listen to its promptings. Follow what it shows and tells you. This is the way."

After speaking these words, Jesus turned and walked away.

At some distance, one of them called out, "But Jesus, should the world not know about you?" He stopped and turned, and said with compassion in his eyes, "Don't you see?

This was never about me. It was always you. You be Jesus now."

You be Jesus now. Amen.