

With Authority

Menno Mennonite Church

June 4, 2023

Purpose: To connect the task of the great commission to the blessing Christ gives the efforts of the Kingdom.

Message: As people of the kingdom, we are granted authority to be about the work of the kingdom not to judge the world, but to continue the kingdom coming.

Scripture: Matthew 28: 16-20 (I will read); Genesis 1:26-31 (Please read/have read)

Synopsis: Authority can be controversial. Who has the power to do what when means a great deal. We spend a good deal of our human time creating the mechanisms to delegate power and process to maintain the use of it. Is there much wonder that throughout his ministry Jesus was confronted on the grounds of authority, wondering where his extra ordinary power came from and what that would mean? Especially within Matthew, Jesus' authority is a primary topic of wonder and controversy.

When the time comes from Jesus to return to the right hand of the one who sent him he vests that very authority to those who he leaves behind—the disciples who would come after him. Much as the moment of creation, the way of God is intended to be shown in the way and power of God known in the authority of those enacting the will of God. We are left with that authority and the ongoing question: with such a charge how do we live into the calling of joining in what God is doing in our world?

Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

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 some 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 morning I want to speak about authority. Which seems odd to my ears. Largely because while I know that it exists, and that it is a dynamic in the world in which we live, rarely, if ever, do we feel that we ourselves have authority that is ours to wield. It doesn't seem right and proper somehow to speak about that we know and hold in ourselves that gives us power, especially in church. I wonder if I am alone in feeling this way. As soon as we hear those words our minds go one place almost immediately—to the place of someone claiming the entitlement of knowledge, law, education or position to make decisions and say how things ought to be. We think of authority as a right to do something and know that those rights can be exercised wisely or not. It is enough to get our hackles up a little bit to prepare for a fight as it is not something we are given. Seldom do we understand ourselves in the realm of those with authority.

Yet we all have some authority. We all have our measure of power. Individually, we each have authority and agency in our own lives and business—many of us a considerable degree. We have our spheres of influence of what to do when and how. We have our jobs and our ways of getting the work accomplished and part of taking responsibility for something whether it is what to cook for dinner and how or how to go about this year's farming requires us to exercise authority of how that is going to happen. There is also the authority that we grant to others. Our democratic system is representative exactly because we grant those elected to represent us to exercise power on our behalf. The power is not theirs per se but is granted because they were elected to it. This is simultaneously the most critical part of our system and the most frustrating as we grant people power, but then are to observe how that power is used at times in ways that we would just as soon it wasn't. The bottom line is this: we don't talk about authority both because it is something we are usually convinced does not apply to us and because the power it suggests makes us uncomfortable.

Because authority is controversial and always will be. When we look at the gospel accounts of Jesus' life it is this issue that is almost always the most potent: by what authority do you do these things you do and say these things you say? The actions and sayings themselves were controversial, but the real problem was the authority by which they were accomplished. Especially within Matthew, you see this time and again. Following the sermon on the mount the crowds were astounded that he taught them as the one of authority, not "as their scribes and

teachers.” When he comes to the disciples in the middle of the stormy night on the water, the disciples are shocked by his authority that grants him power even over the forces of nature. The Pharisees are deeply offended that Jesus demonstrates not only the power to heal (something which they could understand as a tick, if a preplacing one) but also the stated ability to forgive sins, something left only to God (as administered by them, it is worth adding). Jesus authorizes others to do what he did, sending the disciples out in chapter 10 to heal all disease and cast out demons. Throughout the whole of the life and ministry of Jesus, the problem of power—who had it and its broader legitimacy—is the crux of the story. For Matthew it is this power that feeds into his broader proof he is offering his readers: see—this is the messiah, just like he said. Now as Jesus is raised from the dead, his ministry is finally and fully validated. As he leaves this earth for the present he reminds them that all authority—fully and finally rests with him.

Now as Jesus prepares to return to his eternal position—where he came from and where he returns to—as it was from the very beginning, he is doing some delegation of authority to the disciples who are now being charged with the incarnational work of making the kingdom of Earth as it is in heaven. The assignment from Genesis: *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”* evolves to his words as noted in Matthew: *“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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* Jesus is delegating the authority that he has been given (hence the therefore) to those who would take up the work and make the kingdom real with Christ.

Humanity has always been charged with responsibility for tending, maintaining, and advancing God’s creative acts in the world. God has always chosen to work through people. In creation, we were created to resemble God; in the incarnation, Jesus comes to resemble us. Through it all, Creator continues to refine us anew through the power of abiding love. Jesus’ invitation to the mountain is an investment of Godly authority into the profoundly earthly vessels of the disciples.

It is worthy of note that the disciples are elected to this position by his own will. He invited them to meet him on the mountain, a message he gives to the women in the garden on

Easter Morning by Matthew's telling. It is here that they see him and worship him. It is here too, we are told, that some doubted. But Jesus does not separate them by the strength of their convictions or their ability to make sense of what was amazing to their own eyes. He does not submit them to a litmus test of doctrine or decision before giving them the charge to spread the good news that they were still struggling to get their minds around. He commissions them; he commissions us to make the good news way of being, living and going because that is what he was sent to do: make real the way of God and to re-create the world into the Kingdom of God. The authority that was his and remains his is now shared with those who would follow after, even unto the end of the age.

All of which is quite the thing to consider on a calm June Sunday morning. We are disciples of the risen Christ. Being disciples, we are given the authority of the one who we follow and the one who we are charged to represent. What a promise; what responsibility.

Yet we are not given to disturbing the peace around us by recalling the authority that we have been given. We are not given to taking that memory all the seriously in the first place. And sometimes, I wonder whether we are the poorer for it. From time to time, I have been asked to exercise the spiritual authority that I, must ashamedly admit, am not always as convicted that I possess as those who I have met along the way. I have been asked to exorcise demons from the apartments of those who are haunted in mind and in spirit. I have granted the forgiveness of sins to the dying in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, sometimes to people who I have not met, but only remember Mennonites as people of their youth and those who you call when you do not want to be alone. I have gone not because of my education or my qualification to do so, but because of the office I am given to occupy and because it is asked of me. Given the commission of Christ, who am I to deny? I firmly believe that the authority is not confirmed because of the title. This is the authority granted all disciples who would follow the way of Christ. but the opportunities are far harder to avoid when that is what you have been given to do. Christ's authority is our authority. What might the world be like if we would wake to this call and go and do like wise in the name of the one who sent us? What would it be like if we were to move from "I forgive you" to "by the grace of God, you are forgiven, just as I have been"? In the name of Christ, we are given the ability to do just that. We hesitate because we are sometimes frightened that it is OUR power in which we act. But that is not the case and it

never was. It is Christ in us, through us, in Spite of us that makes the difference. Where might we be taken were we to take on the healing of Spirits within and without as we do the rebuilding of houses? What would happen were we to take the role of being the incarnational part of creation the world? As scary as it might be to contemplate, what would happen if we were to work at becoming more comfortable with our calling in Christ's authority.

Matthew's gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus, rooting him deeply in the Story of God and God's people. It is a tree full of names of those who journeyed, struggles, and wrestled with the God who was faithful through it all. Matthew ends with that tree spreading wide its branches to all who would come and be found in the authority of the one who calls them to something new.

The Gospel closes with a promise "I am with you always; even to the end of the age. It is this promise that grants us not just authority, but the promise of Christ in us that makes this possible. The Power, energy and love that spoke the world into being is gifted to human creatures. The authority of the triune God delegates care, responsibility and presence into our hands. How can we not carry this forth with full authority, proclaiming the kingdom come, now and always?