

We stand in a long tradition of people who look to Scripture as authoritative. The WORD (capitalized) is central to our faith. The same is true of many other faith traditions whose scriptures form a vital role in their expression of faithfulness.

So, it is always a little strange when someone stands to read on the sabbath, and the words don't sound like we're used to.

Did you notice?

Yet, it's Sunday, and these words have privilege of place in our worship. They have authority for us – not for nothing do Presbyterians ordain folks (like me) to ministry of “Word & Sacrament” (notice the word order?) and that we are also called teaching elders. Words are important to us – Scripture especially – and it can be unsettling to hear those words reimagined; restated; differently translated; or (heaven help us) reinterpreted.

But reinterpretation is essential, because these words belong to a particular time and place that is not our time and place. They need to be heard *and understood*; we need to work at understanding the application of the wisdom they may contain. So, while the words are revered and are given a kind of authority, God's people have ALWAYS needed help in figuring out what to do with that reverence and how to apply that authority. That's what our lessons illustrate – and it's a tradition we've been content (for the most part) to follow.

Priests, scribes, and other folk have long been part of helping God's people find their way in this world. God's people have always needed someone to tell the stories and interpret the law – to mediate disputes and organize rituals and festivals. This is how organized religion develops. This is what the institutional church is for. And the church gets its authority through a complicated connection of word-spirit-people; a great swirling mystery of relationship, with God in the centre.

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After the reconstruction of the city walls, Ezra brings out the big guns – he will ‘proclaim the word’ and do what any fair-minded religious leader might want to do; start folks out on a new path with a clean slate. This is meant to orient people toward God again – to remind them who is in charge - and the people, upon hearing the law read and explained, weep.

This is a pretty interesting reaction. Are they crying from sorrow for lost opportunities? Are they crying out of guilt? Shame? Joy???

The suggestion is they are mourning lost opportunities, and grateful that their city and the nation has rediscovered God’s favour. The priests remind them that being grounded in the Holy is a good thing. ‘The joy of the Lord is your strength’ they say as they pass out the hankies and dry these curious tears. The word has authority over these folks in the way it is delivered and for the message that it brings, since the Law was intended to ground people in holy community, in mutual respect and consideration, and in the love of God, above all.

So, generations later, when Jesus stands to read from Isaiah, the substance of the law has not changed. It is still the authority around which a holy community is gathered. It is still the force that forms cultural habits and opinions.

It is also interpreted and controlled by those with a vested interest in keeping authority close. The Holy is near, but not at the centre for those who covet a different kind of authority.

Jesus gives established religion a huge headache. He is, first of all, faithful. He’s observant and seems to have a respect for and knowledge of the traditions and Scriptures of the day. But he has a troubling habit. His messages – his interpretations – speak challenge to those in charge **about the limits of their authority.**

So, Jesus proclaims the word, and suggests that the word has now been made flesh – the time has come for the oppressed to go free, the blind to see, and the poor and hungry to be given good news. The people are astounded, but unmoved. They wait for something to happen, not realizing that these authoritative words are meant to give them power to act – power to help bring this kingdom of peace and justice into being.

Jesus waits for action, not acclaim.

He gets neither in the end – at least, he doesn't get the kingdom building action that we all long for.

Next week we'll hear about their attempt to run Jesus out of town. For the moment, we wait while Jesus tells them what should happen: Good news to the poor. Release for the captives. Recovery of sight for the blind. Freedom for the oppressed.

They don't know yet that he's not just talking to them, he's talking about them. About the powerful and comfortable; about the clergy and the clerks; about the political system and the societal system. Jesus speaks about all that makes us poor and blind; all of which keeps each of us captive and oppressed in any number of ways. And when he's finished, he sits with certainty and declares that all those things we thought were authoritative are coming to an end.

Authority is a complicated thing. It doesn't exist in a vacuum; it comes with all kinds of entanglements. To be established, authority needs the permission of a group, an organization, a culture or a nation. And when we grant authority to human organizations (governments, churches, lobby groups and the like) WE are responsible to hold these groups accountable.

Too often we don't, because, well, authority is complicated. But we should never, never **forget that the authority we say we give to scripture ought properly to be an admission of God's sovereignty.** The words themselves are just the kernels of an idea of authority. To claim "the bible tells me so" - without understanding where those words come from, or to forget that the hand that held the pen was trying to express an experience of the glory, the magnificence, the holiness of God (something that is inexpressible) – to give the bible 'ultimate authority' is to create an idol of the paper and ink.

Jesus' proclamation on this day was meant to re-define the authority that had grown up around Scripture. He speaks to those who have lived with an understanding of authority that has held them captive to the whims of vain, powerful people. Those words are aimed at us as well; calling us to be critical in our thinking and bold in our action.

Those who would follow Jesus are called to honour and proclaim the word – to live out the principals of justice, mercy and grace found in Scripture without turning the word into an idol. Jesus stands to speak, in a tone that we're not quite used to, and dares us to live for God. Not for 'the faith', not in defence of Scripture, not for the good of tradition, but for God. And to live like that – to strive for justice, mercy, love and grace in the name of Jesus, for the sake of God's glory - that is the beginning of Good News.