

First United Methodist Church-Omaha
Dr. Jane Florence
May 5, 2013
Sermon Title: "Who Says So?"
Text: Gospel of Mary 4:33-39, 5:1-4; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11



There is a credit card commercial series that has featured a spokesman and a toddler girl for several years. The spokesperson has offered "more cash back" for using their card, and "Who doesn't want more cash back?" Evidently just one, this tiny girl, who always responds with the same "No". Last week, the little girl's response changed; her "no" became "why?" I suspect that will be her stock answer for a while. Any who have spent time with developing children know the "why" stage.

In my childhood, the why stage was pretty short-lived, I think. Because if I was told to "brush your teeth, go to bed, let's go, time to eat"; if I responded with "why?" I can pretty much remember my Mom having her stock answer also. "Because I said so." I also soon learned that was the end of the discussion.

"Because I said so." It is a statement of ultimate authority. It's the trump card. "Because I said so." Whether uttered by parent, employer, police, whomever we acknowledge has authority—"because I said so" is sufficient.

Humans operate in social relationships that have a power/authority factor at play. A relationship might be of equal power, or shared power; it might be power over, or power with. Determining the foundation of relational authority is the early dance we humans do with one another. Who arranges the meeting? Who extends the invitation? Who leads the conversation? Who speaks first? Who remains silent? Who sets the tone? Who pays the check? Who gets the last word? Whether it's dating, family, friends, work, school, government, the power is established consciously or unconsciously intentionally or not organically or dictated. That's not necessarily a bad thing it's part of the animal kingdom. Someone has to decide; it might be a single leader, a group decision, a mutual decision; ultimately if we are going to do anything, we have to find a way to relate and make decisions. This is as true today as it always has been.

After the execution of Jesus, the leader, the one who had all authority; those who would follow his Way had to do the dance. Who would lead? Who would follow? Who would share? Who would have "because I said so" authority?

I would like to say it was an easy dance. I would like to say all the followers of Jesus embraced the way of love and peace and justice for all. I would like to say Jesus left an organizational chart for them to follow. I would like to say the church developed in the years after Jesus in a beautiful painless birth. I would like to say those things, but I can't. It didn't.

There was no central power. There was no manual to follow. Each of the communities gathered in houses or meeting places, leaders emerged, but there was no single person or committee to say, "We're doing it this way because I said so," at least, not at first. So the question became for several hundred years, "Who has authority?" "Who has the say so?" Different communities answered the question differently.

The Christian community of Corinth was what we Methodists might now call “a difficult appointment.” We know they struggled with inner conflict around authority because Paul named it in a letter he wrote them just a few years after the community formed. By 53-54 AD, they had some folks who were “puffed up”, boastful and haughty about their faith practices. They tried to establish a pecking order about whose ministry was most valuable, whose gifts were more special.

Paul wrote them, “There are a variety of gifts, but one Spirit. There are a variety of services, but the same Lord. There are a variety of activities, but the same God who activates all.” Everyone is given gifts for the common good. Some are given the gift of teaching, some the gift of faith, some the gift of healing, some miracles, some prophesy, and on... he names the variety of ways God’s Spirit is expressed—not for boasting, not for one better than the other, not for one to dominate, but for all to benefit. Paul had launched this community, so Paul corrected this community telling them, “Get along! Respect each other. Honor each other. Quit quarreling.” Evidently his “because I said so” didn’t stick.

Another leader, one who is credited by some to have taken up Paul’s mantle of leadership, Clement I, also wrote a letter to the community of Corinth about 40 years after Paul. The church had experienced a bit of a coup; some folks had ousted the leadership. Clement argues, “that God, the God of Israel, alone rules all things... God delegates authority to ‘rulers and leaders on earth’ ... the bishops, priests and deacons. Whoever refuses to ‘bow the neck’ and obey the church leaders is guilty of insubordination against the divine master [God].” Clement warns that “whoever disobeys the authorities (bishops, priests, deacons) ‘receives the death penalty!’”¹ The “death penalty”, eternal damnation, is a pretty strong “because I said so” if you ask me.

By the beginning of the second century, there is one group who is vying for authority over all. To be certain, it’s not a power sharing approach; it is a hierarchal approach. Paul’s teaching “there is no longer slave and free, no longer male/female”, and “God’s Spirit is present in many ways to many people in the community” has been exchanged for “the bishops, priests and deacons have authority from God, bow to them, or else.”

Clement’s successor, Irenaeus, Bishop/Pope of Rome reinforced the notion. He proclaimed that the apostles had founded the church in Rome. Apostolic authority was handed down by means of the succession of the bishops. He proclaimed, “For it is necessary that every church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority.” According to his approach, since no one of later generations can have access to Christ as the apostles did, believers for all time must accept the word of the priests and bishops who claimed to be the only legitimate heirs through Peter, the first “bishop” of the church.²

Irenaeus maintained the apostles had “like a rich man (depositing money) in a bank, placed in the church fully everything that belongs to truth: so that everyone, whoever will, can draw from the water of life”. The Christian believes “the one and only truth from the apostles, which is handed down by the church.” Furthermore, they identified the apostles as the 12 listed in some of the writing that were circulating, and that basically, there was, nor would there be, anything new added to human understanding of the Divine—especially anything that ran contrary to what they established as the only way.

¹Elaine Pagels. *The Gnostic Gospels*. p. 35.

²Pagels, 26.

However, as you might guess, there were those who challenged this “because God empowered us, we get to say so” faction.

There was a question from them about this whole apostolic succession; there was a question by them of even the identity of the apostle(s). Several early Christian writings that did not make it into the church-authorized list of readings, along with some that did, offer another candidate as apostolic leader also. It was someone who, according to all accounts (canon and non-canon), personally traveled with the historical Jesus, witnessed both his death and his resurrection firsthand (and first), and received instruction from Jesus himself. That would be Mary Magdalene.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all name Mary Magdalene as a close follower, a disciple, of Jesus. The gospels are also consistent in reporting that the 12 we usually name as the apostles struggled to understand Jesus and his teachings. Over and over, the texts say the disciples don’t comprehend what Jesus is trying to teach them. Peter appears to especially struggle. He is often impulsive, jumping in or speaking out and, more often than not, being corrected even chastised by Jesus. In Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Mary Magdalene listens and supports Jesus, remains present to him. In several sources that the early fathers of the church did not include, Mary is described as one of Jesus followers who understood more than the others.

When Jesus is preparing to depart from his disciples, the gospels report a common word from Jesus, “peace be with you!” In the Gospel of Mary, Jesus goes on to say, “the Son of Man exists within you. Follow. Preach this good news. Don’t add any rules beyond what I have already given you, don’t give new laws, they will only dominate you.”

Jesus didn’t lay out creeds or doctrines or institutional requirements. “Love one another” seems to be law enough for him. When he said this, he departed. The disciples are grieved, they “wept greatly”. Then Mary stood up, greeted them all, and began to remind them what Jesus had taught them. “Our Savior is with us, within us, let us Praise his greatness. He has taught us how to be fully Human! He has taught us how to love.” When Mary spoke to them, she “turned their hearts” to God. She brought them back from their fears to the focus of their “Teacher”. Mary is leading the others; she is teaching the others; she is reminding the others what Jesus taught.

Later in the writing, Peter speaks out sounding much like the Peter we hear in the other gospels. He’s impetuous, quick to speak out. He questions Mary’s authority. He appears jealous that Mary is able to speak as one who understood what Jesus taught. He vies for his own authority. Levi rebukes Peter saying, “You’ve always been hot-tempered. If the Savior made her worthy, who are you to reject her?”

In a community struggling to discern who to follow, who to give authority, who has “say so”, two options develop. Give authority to those who claim power for themselves. Give authority to those who demonstrate they understand and live what Jesus taught.

Mary understood and appropriated Jesus’ teachings and attained the character of discipleship. She becomes comforter, teacher, mediator of wisdom in a manner after Jesus. She does not judge; she does not boast of herself. She becomes a spiritual guide who is able to lead others back to Christ. She demonstrates spiritual maturity, not human jealousy. Paul talked about the

fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. By this evidence, you will know.

Those Christians who tried to hang on to Paul's teaching of many gifts and one Spirit operated without the hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons. They believed that anyone who experienced Christ would show evidence of Christ in their lives. Those who "knew" would be mature in spirit; their behaviors would reflect the compassion and enlightenment Jesus taught. They believed God's Spirit would continue to lead them into greater and greater knowledge of God. They believed knowing of God could go beyond what 12 men had struggled to understand. They believed that all who grew into knowledge of God demonstrated as much and were equal in the community.

You know how the story ends. You know which group got the "say so". The one organized by rank and order, the one that said we get to decide what you must do and say and believe because we are the one right church. So their writings became the writings. Their ways became the way. But we know there were others whose voices were eventually silenced, whose non-hierarchical ways were forgotten, whose inclusivity was denied.

We can recover their ways as Divine ways also. We work to create a community in this place where all voices are valued: where men and women share in ministry and service, where young and old work side by side in mission, where the community decides the direction of our future, where you are invited to participate in this fellowship of believers, where your visions can be heard and treasured, where your voices and dreams can take root in shared holy ground, where all are welcome, honored and respected growing and maturing in God's love. Amen.