



## *“The Proper Authority”*

Luke 7:1-10

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**June 6, 2010**

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

Ray Smyth was a leader. It was apparent in the way he carried himself. When Ray spoke, people listened. When he made a presentation, there was little left to be said. In board meetings Ray would often wait until the end of a discussion, then sum up the issues and propose a solution that seemed quite obvious. He led graciously and efficiently. With a broad smile and gentle words, he got things done. Ray was respected by everyone, even his opponents.

Perhaps his authority was the result of years as the school superintendent of a large suburban school system that was nationally ranked during his tenure. Certainly, it was the consequence of his years as a classroom teacher and high school principal. I think part of it was the result of his avocation as a church musician. For years he managed the church choir with excellent results. The choir was always prepared and always sounded good.

Ray’s authority seemed innate and was obvious. He’d earned it.

One of my teachers made a distinction between “delegated authority,” the authority that comes with office or position, and “earned authority,” the authority given a leader over time as consequence of performance. Then he would say to his students, who were preparing for pastoral ministry, “Woe to the man who leads out of his delegated authority. He will surely die.”

Well, Ray had both kinds of authority, and led with the authority he’d earned.

Authority is a complex human experience and a fact of the Christian gospel. We need help understanding and living with authority. We can’t seem to live without it, and we aren’t happy with it.

On the one hand, we want, need, even demand authority. We long for structure and clear lines of authority in this world and in our lives. Authority and structure are the roles of government, legal systems, law enforcement, business administration, rules, regulations and traditions.

One of the interesting consequences of the tragic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is the call from figures on the political left and right demanding the Obama administration assert its authority and establish clear lines of accountability in the mess. Even those who ordinarily argue for limited government insist that government use all its authority to fix this disaster.

These formal authority structures exist alongside other authorities. Culture is one of them. Most people wear attire appropriate to the occasion. And we bend to current fashion. It’s not a law, it’s convention, and that convention bears enormous authority.

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Even non-conformists seem to have a uniform common to their non-conformist community. Our public behavior on the street, in the office, or at social events conforms to current cultural norms. We don't wave placards and cheer as the opera is playing, and we don't wear black tie to baseball games. We conform to the authority of our culture.

Beyond these more external authorities, we conform our behavior to internal moral standards and ethical norms we've received from our families, our faith and our culture.

Religion, at its heart, is a form of authority with a specific moral code and ethical standards. Among other things, Christians believe we should obey the Ten Commandments, love our enemies, and make peace. We try under God to conform our lives to a demanding and extensive moral and spiritual authority. Often that spiritual authority clashes with competing authorities in our lives.

To be a human is to deal with authority and to live with a variety of sometimes competing authorities. Authority is inherent in the human experience and we all obey a variety of authorities.

On the other hand, however, we don't want anyone telling us what to do! Americans have been debating the proper limits of governmental authority for centuries. And most of us are quick to note that experience teaches us suspicion of authority. We've seen – and likely felt it – abused.

We know from experience and history that power must be balanced and all authority must be accountable. All forms of authority are abused, and we are rightfully leery of authority.

Our relationship to the authorities in our lives, while necessary, is at the same time complex and sometimes dangerous. The Gospel Lesson is a story about authority and may help clarify how to live with the proper authorities.

Another of my old teachers, Alan Culpepper, a noted literary and biblical scholar, notes that this story is a gem, the first in a cluster of stories that picture various responses to Jesus. Jesus' authority is part of the mix.

Jesus had just returned from a brief mission trip in which, among other things, he taught the Sermon on the Mount. Both Luke and Matthew note that the response to that great Sermon was awe at Jesus' remarkable authority. Something powerful seemed inherent in him and his words.

Jesus and his band of followers came back to Capernaum, a bustling center of commerce and culture on the Sea of Galilee. In that city there lived an unusual and notable man. He was a Roman Centurion stationed in the occupied territory of Galilee. Centurions were backbone of the Roman military and many became significant figures in the empire. Their job was to enforce the power and authority of the Roman Empire.

Needless to say, the Romans were despised in the occupied territories. However, this Centurion was different. He'd won over the locals with generosity and compassion. He'd build a synagogue with his own funds which, of course, made the Jewish leaders and the faithful pleased with him. It appears this powerful Centurion wore his power lightly.

He had a slave, a boy later called "child" in the story, who was gravely ill. He'd heard about Jesus and wondered if he might consent to help a pagan Roman in deep need. The Centurion sent a delegation of Jewish leaders to Jesus who pleaded on his behalf noting his good character and his gifts to the people.

Jesus consented to help and began to walk to the Centurion's home. On the way, another delegation from the Centurion arrived with another message, "I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but merely speak the word and my child will be healed. I am a

man of authority. I speak and things happen. My word bears weight and I believe yours does too.”

Jesus was amazed at – note this – this pagan’s “faith.” He had faith missing in many of the so-called faithful in Israel. He understood authority. He placed himself under Jesus’ authority and trusted Jesus with his life and the life of his servant.

Ever since, Christians have confessed that the creative word of Jesus Christ does what it says, and when mixed with faith, that authoritative word creates and sustains the church – and us. Faith, trust in the authority of God revealed in Jesus Christ, makes Christ present in the church and the world.

The continuing issue for us all is to what authority or authorities do we entrust our lives, or more importantly, our souls? In a world of abusive, overreaching, and often corrupt authorities, whom do we trust and to whom do we entrust our lives?

From the beginning, the universal and unanimous claim of the Christian Church is a simple confession of faith scattered through the New Testament, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” That confession means he has unique authority and his claim on us in exclusive.

Amid all the competing claims of authority in our lives, each with its own claims on us, one authority stands above them all. For the Christian the final (not the only, but the final) authority is Jesus Christ. He claims our allegiance and he calls us to entrust our lives to him. His word is the final word.

All other authorities are provisional and partial. We do not give our souls to the church. The church is accountable to its Lord. Neither the government nor any nation is our sovereign. All states are accountable to God and too often are unjust and oppressive. We certainly cannot claim ourselves as the final authority. Our conscience, important as it is, can err. Our judgment is faulty and our decisions often wrong. We need a Lord, an authority to make sense of our lives and the competing authorities in our lives.

In the final analysis, to be a Christian is to trust the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ as the way, the truth and the life. God established Jesus Christ as Lord, and we belong to him.

The most common confession I hear these days is also simple. “Jesus Christ is our savior and Lord.” Note the word “Lord.” It is one thing to believe in Jesus. It is quite another to follow him as Lord.

The consequences of Christ’s Lordship are large. Faith rearranges our lives, our work, our families, our play – and life in the church. Not the least among the consequences of this faith is the grace, love and peace offered to all and experienced in the community of faith. That grace and love is symbolized in this table at which Christ the Lord promises to come and give us himself, to feed our souls, strengthen our faith and establish peace in the deep places of our lives.

Come to the table of Christ, the Lord.

Amen.