

The Authority Challenge

Acts 7: 51-60

John 14: 1-10

Being smart people, I'm sure that when someone shares something with you of a revelatory nature, something shocking, incredible, and unbelievable, you consider the source of this information. You wouldn't simply consume it indiscriminately. You would seek confirmation from a reliable authority.

For instance, these days there are an amazing number of people who disbelieve the threat of COVID-19, believing it to be a conspiracy theory to do any number of things that conspiracy theories perceive to be nefariously and inexorably at work to harm the people of the land. These are called conspiracy theories because their authority has been found lacking or absent. They are produced for simple desires, like to gain attention, to cause disruption, to foster anger and outrage, to undermine trust and confidence, and the like.

A video has been circulating this week of a well-educated professor, scientist Dr. Judy Mikovits, who claims that the coronavirus was caused by a bad strain of flu **vaccine** that was circulating between 2013 and 2015. She also claimed masks will "activate" the virus and re-infect a mask-wearer over and over. She would seem to have the credentials that grant her authority to make such claims and to be believed. Two reasonably intelligent friends on Facebook shared the video with me, and I notice it has gained lots of attention in the conservative political forum on Facebook. Since lots of people are sharing it, and two people who I tend to respect, then it must be true, right?

Her scientific claims can, of course, be checked, as well as her previous personal history. She had been dismissed from one lab almost 10 years ago after it was discovered that she and her colleague had tampered with and contaminated tests in order to produce the outcome that she wanted. She has gone on to become a prominent anti-vaccine conspiracy theorist which her latest claim clearly echoes. The weight of the scientific community has denounced her claims with one scientist stating, "the amount of nonsense, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy mongering in Mikovits' response to questions is truly epic."

This overwhelming if not universal opinion of scientists in particular bears authority that far outweighs any claims to authority by Dr. Judy Mikovits. Further, her personal history makes it clear that she has no problem coming to unfounded and unwarranted conclusions. Because of these factors, she loses her authority and credibility. That is, unless you want her claims to be validated because they reflect your view – that COVID-19 is a hoax. The video has been removed once again from YouTube and Facebook, thank goodness.

I've taken you through this exercise so that as we come to today's topic of authority, the authority of Jesus in particular, we can see what happens when a new voice appears that contradicts accepted authority. In the case of science, claims can be proven or disproven by examination of results and replication of tests. In the case of faith and religion, we are in a whole different context. Authoritative claims in this context have much different parameters.

In the Easter season, the lectionary readings use texts from Acts instead of from the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. I've resisted the last two weeks, but this week we turn to Acts' story of the disciple-apostle Stephen, his trial and execution by the religious authorities in Jerusalem. His speech during his trial forms almost all of Acts 7.

Stephen is only mentioned before his arrest in ch. 6 as one of the Hellenistic Jews charged with the distribution of bread to the Hellenistic Jewish widows who were being slighted by the Palestinian Hebrews. It seems to indicate that earliest church was already having growing pains as typically less-observant Hellenistic Jews needed to jockey for leadership. Stephen was apparently a leader among the Hellenistic Jews following Jesus. He is noted to have caused considerable upset with his preaching in synagogues in Jerusalem where Hellenistic Jews gathered. His controversial preaching inspires charges against him that leads him to his trial before the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

Under arrest and on trial, Stephen shows no reluctance to continue to expound about the authority of Jesus and the corruption of the religious authorities. As you can imagine, this does not endear Stephen to his judges. Stephen cites the resistance of God's people to God's way as it occurs repeatedly throughout biblical history.

Then we come to today's selection which is Stephen's grand finale. He denounces the authorities as: *You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit!* Stephen has appealed to the biblical record to declare the authority of the authorities as invalid; they are just as corrupt and self-serving as their ancestors who disregarded God's word and way.

Stephen adds an update for good measure: *Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One [presumably referring to John the Baptist]. And now you have betrayed and murdered him — you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.*

As the text says, the authorities were incensed at his words. Some of the onlookers are already looking around for choice stones – “Oh, that one looks like it should make a mark.” But Stephen was not finished. He had one more line that would

push the religious authorities over the edge. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

That did it. The crowd began handing their coats to Saul the persecutor of the Jesus’ people – “Here, Saul, watch my coat – I need to get good velocity and freedom of movement to throw stones.”

What is it about that line that sends the crowd into a frenzy? One phrase stands out – *the Son of Man*. We have heard that expression or title in other places referring to Jesus. It is only found in this context of titled authority in the gospels and in one place in Revelation. This instance in Acts is the only occasion in which Jesus is referred to as “the Son of Man” outside the gospels and within all of the book of Acts. Even Paul refers to Jesus Messiah or Jesus Christ as if Christ was Jesus’ last name and never refers to Jesus as “Son of Man.”

Here in Stephen’s speech, the title is key; it is the authoritative title to describe Jesus’ role to the Sanhedrin. Jesus is the one authorized by the Ancient of Days – by God – as described in Daniel 7. That authority is sweeping, giving the Son of Man full authority to bring the worldly powers into line with God’s way and fulfill God’s will.

For Stephen, it represents the highest authority, the one who is sent by God, commissioned to bring salvation to all humanity, to reconcile heaven and earth and establish God’s will over the corrupt worldly powers. However, the religious authorities cannot let this authority go unchallenged. Indeed, this challenge must be eliminated, punished swiftly and completely with summary execution. So, Stephen becomes the first martyr, the first one to be executed for championing the Son of Man and his way as authoritative presenting God’s will.

If you think that the earliest Jesus-followers had a tough time convincing those around them of Jesus’ authority, let’s remember that Jesus had issues with his own disciples, the hapless troop that hung around Jesus and learned little.

We get a solid dose of this state of imperviousness to new thinking in our passage from John 14. This is Jesus’ final discourse in the gospel of John. The bread and cup and washing of the feet have occurred; Jesus has predicted his betrayal and Peter’s denial. He has several chapters more to say in teaching his disciples.

Here he begins by sharing some reassurance, knowing that time is just about up for his ministry. He tells them: ‘I am going to my father’s house where I will prepare a place for you.’ He closes by saying much too confidently” “You know the way to the place where I am going.”

Speaking for his bewildered disciple-colleagues, Thomas jumps in to say: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus does a head shake and then tells the group: *I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.* In this statement, Jesus identifies himself as “the way,” his teachings and ministry as the way to fulfill God’s will for advancing the Kingdom over the powers of the world. Jesus is **not** making an absolute statement of either-or which is what many Christians sadly read into it. That corruption is used to justify the belief that there is no salvation, no worthy religion, apart from faithfulness to Jesus and being a Christian. Rather, Jesus’ way is the way to reflect the will of God, and if you reflect the will of God, then you are following Jesus’ way. In this sense, those who reflect the will of God for peace, goodness, justice, and compassion are following Jesus’ way even if they have not professed faith in Jesus. There is a big difference.

In any case, Jesus has not helped the disciples with his answer. They would like directions like a road map or a GPS. Jesus tells them that **he** is the way, not a particular route. Yes, they are being *that* dense.

But since Jesus’ answer has only confused them more, we then have a real head-scratching comment from Philip. He says to Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.”

The text is generously silent about Jesus’ reaction. I would imagine an apt description would be dumbstruck, jaw-dropping incredulity. After picking his face off the floor, and several head shakes, we hear Jesus’ words indicating his incredulity: *Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? The words I say to you I do not speak **on my own authority.***

Jesus will go on to elaborate the closeness with which Jesus finds himself in relationship with the Father. As one who has self-identified as the Son of Man, authorized by God to advance the Kingdom in God’s creation and bring the reconciliation of heaven and earth, Jesus sees himself, his teachings and ministry, as the mirror reflection of the will of God. Jesus is trying to solidify in the disciples’ minds his own sacred authority, because they obviously weren’t paying much attention all the other times. Jesus’ authority is God’s authority given to him.

In the course of this, Jesus reveals quite amazingly: *Truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.* We should hear two things.

First, belief is shown in works; belief without works is a fraud. This brings us back to what was said earlier, that if you’re working for peace, healing, justice, and new

life among God's people, then you're following Jesus' way. Your ability to recite the Apostles' Creed from memory and affirm it means nothing.

Second, those who are following Jesus' way in their living ministry of activity *will do even greater things than these*. Not only are you who follow Jesus' model of ministry granted sacred authority, you will also experience sacred empowerment, doing even more than what Jesus was able to accomplish.

Jesus settles the authority question. It is not in doing worship a certain way. It is not in believing all the right things. It is not in any of the things that churches have been impressing upon their members for centuries. It is doing the will of God, acting for peace, justice, and new life for all people. In doing what God has always sought us to do, we realize the authority that Jesus has, and that authority is granted to us so that we can do even greater things.