

## HOMILY - 4th SUN. OF ORDINARY [B] {The Authority}

When I was in the Army in basic training, my life was completely under the authority of the sergeant. He was the one who led the training, woke us up at 4:00 am and turned out the lights in the evening after a full day. If we were goofing off or just not paying close enough attention, we would have to drop and do 20 pushups. At the end of basic, I was commissioned a second lieutenant. My former drill sergeant was the first one to salute me.

When I was in the third grade - a long time ago - my teacher was Miss Fowler. She was the one who instilled in me a life-long love of the subject of History. I remember she was always very kind, took the time to explain, and no question was ever a problem for her.

I mention these two people because they are examples of authority. Yet they represent two different types. The sergeant was a person who was put in authority over people because he had the experience and rank. Miss Fowler was a person with authority we listened to and followed because we knew she had our best interests at heart.

We hear so many loud and even angry voices today telling us who we should follow and what we should do. Some of these voices claim to have only our best interests at heart. Others use scare tactics to get us to take some action. All of them, however, say or imply that *they* are the authority on the issue and we should follow them.

In today's Gospel we hear people like you and me exclaiming out loud that they have finally heard someone who was not like the others; someone who taught with a *new* authority. Why, in this country today, based on freedom and the rights of the individual, should we have to obey *any* authority other than what the law requires of us? Were the people in that synagogue almost 2,00 years ago mistaken? What was the authority of Jesus that amazed the crowd and why has no human authority ever equaled it?

In order to better understand the authority with which Jesus spoke and taught, we can contrast his way of teaching and speaking with what we hear today, especially in these months before the general election.

The first type of “teaching” we hear today, usually in the form of commercials or on billboards, is negative teaching. This is the type of pronouncement that seeks to make you form a bad opinion about a person or idea. It takes comments out of context, twists things that were actually said and tries to paint a portrait of fear of a person. I don’t have to give you any examples of these destructive, negative ads – we’ve all been exposed to them. They don’t make you feel good – in fact, they are designed to upset and anger.

In contrast, Jesus spoke of what is good. Jesus taught that we are not to be afraid, we are to seek the good of other people and we are to build each other up – not tear other people down. Jesus was teaching the eternal truths – the values that really matter in the long run. He spoke out of compassion for people and gave many examples (called parables) of what he meant. It didn’t take a genius or a well-educated person to figure out what he was saying. He spoke from his heart, and his listeners could easily tell that he truly cared what happened to them and their families.

A second type of “teaching” we hear today is the person with the agenda. Usually, this person masquerades as a journalist or blogger who is only reporting the facts, but the agenda behind this pose peeks through for those paying attention. The agenda these people have is to belittle, demean and eventually eliminate those others who disagree with them. This is done by using fear, claimed conspiracies and misinformation to scare people into thinking that it must be best to follow the agenda of these negative people. The test here is, if the agenda is followed, who ultimately benefits?

In contrast, Jesus had no agenda, other than to lift up what was good and try to save people. His “agenda” was the well-being of *all* people, especially the poor, the oppressed and the outcast of society. Jesus knew that kings, rich people and the educated could take care of themselves. He did not reject them (for example, the Rich Young Man), but his agenda was to help those who most needed help, and to offer the benefits of the Kingdom of God to everyone. Jesus had no desire to look good in front of the powerful, he had no desire to curry favor with the influential or the mighty. He had no need for badges, rank or money. It was this freedom from patrons and influential bosses that the crowd admired about his teaching.

The third type of “teaching” we are subjected to today is that of polarizing society. There is no more room for compromise; it is either “my way,” or the wrong way. Today’s pundits and columnists are not only seeking to divide us into the “rights” and the “wrongs,” they go beyond that to demonize anyone who argues against them. Those who disagree are not only wrong, they are evil. It is as if those who disagree are traitors and should be shunned, or even eliminated. This is the kind of angry and radical talk we hear today.

In contrast, Jesus taught with kindness, mercy and compassion. Even as to those who transgressed, like the Woman Caught in Adultery, he does not condemn or seek to eliminate. Instead, he asks the so-called elders to reconsider; to see the woman from behind their own sins and then ask if they are any better? Jesus has experienced everything we have except sin. He knew what it was to be poor, to be alone, to be betrayed, to be admired, and to have friends die or leave him. This was the basis of his authority. He did not need to recite pious formulas, or point the finger of blame. He had walked the walk, and the crowd could see that and hear that in what he had to say to them. He was one of us, and he seeks to lift us up to a better world, a world of peace and gentleness.

There is some irony in the Gospel today. The crowd, although amazed by the quality of Jesus’ teaching, still did not recognize that he was actually the Messiah. The one they had been waiting for all along was standing in front of them and they never knew it. It was only the unclean spirit in the possessed man who recognized him. In a similar way, many of us today do not recognize that we are ruled by some authority. Many people today like to say that they are individuals and will follow no authority except what they deem acceptable. Yet, in truth, we all follow some authority. Whether it’s what our peers are saying or doing, or the pursuit of money, fame or security, or even our fashions or superstitions, we all have some person, rule or ritual we follow.

The question is, are we following the one authority that can not only bring us peace in this life, but eternal happiness in the life to come? Are we truly following Jesus Christ?