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Matthew 4:12-23

AUTHORITY FIGURES

The Gospel writer of Matthew tells us that Jesus approached Peter and his brother Andrew, and James and his brother John as they were fishing and said to them, "Follow me." And they immediately left their nets and boats and followed him. It's hard for us to fathom that kind of obedience--especially when Jesus was pretty much a stranger to them. We might imagine that the brothers had heard Jesus preach as he made his way throughout the region. Maybe they were impressed with what they heard. Maybe they found this guy Jesus very charismatic, very compelling. But still, they had no personal interactions with him before he walked up to them and said to them, "Follow me." And still, they obeyed.

It is hard to imagine the kind of authority Jesus must have conveyed for the four brothers to just leave their lives behind and go after Jesus. Somehow Jesus conveyed that he was someone to be listened to, to follow, to learn from. That's what authority means, right? Authority is power to influence others, the power to command certain behavior, or thoughts, or beliefs.

Some of us resist those in authority. We don't want people to tell us what to do. We may cherish our autonomy. But none of us is truly autonomous. There are always people or institutions who command authority. When we were children our authority figures were typically our parents and teachers. As we grew older, we had to abide by the authority of an employer, a boss. Whether it is driving the speed limit or paying our taxes, we either abide by the authority of our city, state, and national governments or we will find ourselves in a lot of legal trouble.

No doubt in the course of your life, you have encountered authority figures who have used their power and influence constructively and those who have used their power and influence destructively. Profound and lasting damage occurs when a trusted authority figure breaks that trust: a parent who abuses a child, or police who engage in misconduct, or clergy who abuse, or politicians who are dishonest. In such cases, people can wind up distrusting anyone in authority as well as the institutions of authority.

We live in a time when a lot of institutional authority is questioned. This includes the institutions of the Church, the government, and the media. There is great distrust toward these once honored institutions and a great many people are no longer willing to accept their authority any more. But here's the thing. When we relinquish authority in one realm, we generally need to lodge it somewhere else. The question is, who else, what else, where else will hold authority in our lives? Will it be the whims of opinions voiced over social media? Will the tech giants be the new institutions of authority? Or maybe the advertisers selling us products and an image of a life we should want? Who holds authority in our lives?

Matthew's gospel begins with Jesus offering a contrasting image of authority to what the people in the region of Galilee knew. The people of Galilee knew the reality of Rome's version of authority. Rome was the oppressive foreign power that ruled the region through coercion and intimidation and by terrorizing the citizens into compliance. Rome's authority was used to enrich itself by extracting every possible penny it could from an already impoverished people. That was the reality of Rome's authority.

But Jesus comes along and he offers a different kind of authority that spoke to a different reality. We are told that Jesus goes around the region preaching the good news of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is this new authority Jesus tells people about. And it isn't some far

of possibility. Jesus tells people that the kingdom of God has come near. It's really close by. When Jesus calls the disciples to "follow me," he is calling them to offer their lives to the authority of the kingdom of God.

And the kingdom of God is as different from the kingdom of Rome as day is to night. As the disciples follow Jesus day after day, they see where this kingdom of God is found and what it looks like. The kingdom of God is found in acts of compassion and efforts at forgiveness. The kingdom of God is found when those excluded and marginalized are included and when justice is carried out. The kingdom of God is found when people in need are helped and healing love is given.

If you ever wonder how to decide whether an authority figure deserves your allegiance, here is the test: does he/she/or it adhere to the values of the kingdom of God? Does this authority reveal the good news of God's love? Does it liberate people from oppression? Does it honor all people and offer hope? Does it seek peace and encourage generosity? Does it offer forgiveness and believe in second chances?

How many of our leaders in positions of authority would withstand such a test? Indeed, not even the Christian Church has always lived up to this standard. The Church's authority throughout history has too often been used to coerce or intimidate people into accepting Jesus, to demean people who were different, to exclude those who didn't conform. Far too many times, the Christian Church has totally misunderstood what the kingdom of God is about and had failed to live it out. Instead, it has followed the authorities of this world in its methods and practices.

Jesus offers a different kind of authority: one where power is rooted in love, one where power is used to heal, one where power is used to transform. Jesus shows the disciples the

kingdom of God and calls them to live under this authority. And Jesus shows *us* this kingdom and calls *us* to live under this authority.

That's exactly what happens at baptism. Baptism is about offering our lives to God's authority. Two weeks ago we read about Jesus' baptism and how he offered himself to living out God's kingdom. Then last week we celebrated the Sacrament of Baptism for a beautiful little Alaina, and promised to teach her about the kingdom of God. But today, today's story from Matthew invites us to consider our own baptisms. In baptism, Jesus calls to us, "follow me." Baptism is when we give ourselves to the authority of the kingdom of God. The actual day of our baptism may have been a long time ago, but we need to recall the covenant of baptism every single day of our lives, this covenant where God has chosen us in love and *for* love.

Matthew concludes his gospel Jesus offering words to underscore his authority. The risen Jesus has appeared to his disciples and is about ready to ascend to heaven. It is the last time his followers will see him. And he offers these parting words of authority: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." In other words, teaching people to obey the way of love, the way of compassion, the way of justice, the way of grace. That's the true authority in our lives: allegiance to the way of love, compassion, justice, and grace. And when we follow Jesus in this way, then the kingdom of God is indeed very near.