

Title: Question [Religious] Authority
Text: Mark 12: 38 - 40
Date: Nov. 11, 2018

I'd like to think that my generation had something to do with it. That's when the phrase "Question Authority" was popularized. Timothy Leary challenged people to, "**Think for yourself and question authority,**" and that invitation had such appeal at that time that you started seeing "Question Authority" on bumper stickers and t-shirts. As a matter of fact, that orientation caught on so much with young people that Richard Nixon called Timothy Leary "**the most dangerous man alive.**"

This, of course, greatly pleased him. Leary said, "**When Nixon called me that, I was thrilled. The President of the United States whom many Americans and the rest of the world thought was a crazed, psychotic danger, for him to be calling me that, that's my Nobel Prize, that's my bumper sticker, that my trophy on the wall.**"

You might question the wisdom of my addressing this topic on Pledge Dedication Sunday. After all, if I successfully persuaded you to question religious authority, do I run the risk that you might change your mind and tear up your pledge? Frankly, I am not terribly concerned about that. You see, I think there are healthy ways and unhealthy ways to question authority, and I hope you'll be attracted to the healthy way.

Narrowing our focus to the questioning of *religious* authority, there seems to be some pretty clear precedent for that. The scribes and the Pharisees were the unquestioned religious authorities of Jesus' era, and yet he said, "**Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.**" (Mk. 11: 38-40) Elsewhere Jesus refers to the Pharisees and Sadducees as a "**brood of vipers.**" (Matt. 3:7) Jesus told both the disciples and the crowds, "**but do not do as [the scribes and Pharisees] do, for they do not practice what they teach.**" (Matt. 23:3) Surely you know that I could go on and on with references like this, but suffice it to say that there is pretty good precedent in the Bible for questioning religious authority.

This angle of questioning religious authority relates to something I said a couple of weeks ago when we were talking about systemic evil or institutional evil. We contended that once any social system exists, it has to maintain and assert itself at all costs. That's the nature of things. The Pharisees and Sadducees were part of a system that – though religious in nature – needed to defend itself at all costs. It needed to assure itself that it had the financial wherewithal to maintain the system. It needed to assure itself that it had the status and power to maintain the system. Our text today illustrates how Jesus saw this clearly. Jesus questioned this kind of religious authority.

The Catholic church has been in the news a lot in recent decades for widespread abuse of children primarily by priests. When cases surfaced, abusive priests were moved to other parishes because the social system needed to protect itself at all costs. By the 1990s, the cases began to receive significant media and public attention. There was the documentary *Suffer the Children*, and more recently the 2015 film *Spotlight* which reviewed the critical investigation of The Boston Globe. Though the church offers apologies, its orientation was still to protect itself and its fortunes. Jesus would have us question this kind of religious authority.

Of course there are other kinds of religious authority that deserve questioning. Beyond the realm of protecting the wealth of the church, the church can also exert power by being the

institution by which truth is defined and managed. Once you are in the truth management business, it is a small leap to then be in the morality management business. The church – or any religious institution - can exert considerable power once it becomes the self-proclaimed authority that prescribes how people should both think and act. While it might sound strange for a professional clergy person to be saying this, I would suggest that Jesus would have us question this kind of authority. This does not imply a reactionary discounting without thinking, but rather genuinely, honestly, asking questions and exploring the premise of various arguments.

Sometimes it seems that we gravitate towards religious authority because that is easier than thinking. We abuse the Bible by treating it like an answer book, rather than seeing it as a book filled with conflicts and paradoxes and historical inaccuracies. However, it is precisely by learning to struggle with these seeming paradoxes that we grow up – not by avoiding them with brief one-sentence answers from the Catechism. We have inadvertently created people who prefer quick answers, rather than humble seekers of God and truth. I sometimes suspect Karl Barth had a mystical side. In his *Theology of Reformed Confessions* he claimed the Reformed confessions were not **"a frozen river . . . on which one could walk . . . They were rather a freely flowing river, in which one can only swim."**

I would contend that we should also question and be wary of religious authority because more often than not religious authority tends to be wary of religious experience, rather than preparing fertile soil for religious experience. Genuine religious experience cannot be controlled, and religious authority is not very comfortable when it is out-of-control.

This current tack in our discussion reflects not only a change in the church in general, but a change in Shepherdstown Presbyterian specifically. The church in general seems to be becoming less dogmatic . . . or at least that branch of the church that seems to have a future. While we do still feel attracted to the way and spirit of Jesus, we no longer find it scary or threatening to be open to the possibility that there is wisdom to be had in other traditions. We have found attractive elements in the realm of mystery, rather than being fearful of that which we cannot explain. And beyond living in the head, we have discovered an invitation to an opening of the heart that changes us. We have discovered the word "transformation."

To be clear, I intentionally started this meditation with a call to question "religious authority," as opposed to "spiritual authority." As I use these terms, "religious authority" implies a broader institutional orientation, and institutions always need defending.

"Spiritual authority" doesn't need defending, does not seek to defend itself, and frankly could care less about defending itself. "Spiritual authority" is a by-product of one's own experience of the divine, and not as a result of a seminar where one is taught the Four Spiritual Laws, or the secrets of sacred posture. You don't need to evaluate the spiritual authority of another. You sense it or you don't. It makes a difference or it doesn't. Encountering someone with innate spiritual authority has no implication of hierarchy. Encountering someone with spiritual authority touches you with both love and hope.

As I suggested earlier, I think there are healthy ways and unhealthy ways to question authority. One can question authority flippantly, and in a condescending fashion. One can also question authority humbly and earnestly.

Rather than generating questions that are designed to trip up another, and knock them off their pedestal; I would love for us to be the kind of community where questions can be earnest and humble. In this case spiritual authority can be questioned not as though simple answers were being pursued, but as though life stories were being pursued. After all, some truths are better

caught than taught. It is in hearing the story of another that our heart might be opened to new ways of seeing.

So by way of wrapping up this brief meditation, we should be asking the tough questions that challenge religious authority, including the authority of our own Presbyterian institution. This is not with the assumption that must blow up the institution, but that we must at least be ready to shine a light on its innate bias towards institutional survival.

Aside from being combative, however, may we also rediscover the art of asking genuine, sincere, innocent questions. There is something to be said for lovingly questioning spiritual authority. Jesus knew whether or not questions directed towards him were sincere. So rather than only using questions as tools to build our case, may we rediscover the art of asking questions with a beginners mind . . . with the innocence of a child. For such is the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

Mark 12: 38 -44 Jesus Denounces the Scribes

***As he taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! *They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."**