

# Authority, Community and Incarnation

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**I Corinthians 8:1-13 and Mark 1:21-28**

We will recite, in a few moments, the Apostles' Creed, one of the ancient faith statements of our tradition. I know that there are varying views of the creed. Some embrace it as it represents the common vocabulary of our tradition. Some don't embrace it, or all of it, because it does not reflect your own personal theological beliefs. I included it today mindful of those perspectives, primarily because it is the creed that the earliest church used at the time of baptism, which happened once a year, on Easter Saturday, and today is a baptism Sunday.

We have just baptized Ian Kenneth Baker. Ian, you may remember, had a central role in the Boars Head Festival just past – he was, in fact, the baby Jesus. I must confess a little nervousness this morning, a guy named John baptizing the baby Jesus!

If you look at the Apostles' Creed and do a word count, you will note that most of the creed is spent on Jesus. God the Father, one sentence. God the Holy Spirit, one sentence, with other doctrinal matters following. Look at how much time and energy is invested in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, and so on. But note also, in all that *is* included, what is not. Born of the Virgin Mary, (comma) suffered under Pontius Pilate. The Council that composed the Apostles' Creed was addressing the theological controversies of the moment, much of which swirled around the divinity of Christ. That means his earthly ministry, which we take very seriously and which inspires us a great deal, is left to a comma, to a punctuation mark. We've remedied that over the centuries with other statements of faith, but still, you get the point.

I got the point again just a few weeks ago when the very same Ian Kenneth who we baptize this morning starred in the aforementioned Boars Head Festival. My role was king #2. "Frankincense to offer, had I." I sing one stanza of "We Three Kings," hoping to remember the words and not

in any other way embarrass myself or my family. We three kings then turn and present our gifts to the Christ child, and following a choral anthem, kneel with the entire cast in front of the holy family. Even with the theatricality and hopes that my knees will hold up, it is always a powerful and profound moment. Here we are, kneeling before a representation of that punctuation mark, the Word made flesh, as if this child, this vulnerable, at risk, all-too-human being, has great power, has great authority. Yet he does.

Call it mystery, call it paradox, but we believe that the one who rose again from the dead, who ascended into heaven, who sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty, is also the one who will, like all of us, laugh and cry, eat and drink, bleed and die. It is easy to kneel in front of that *divine* Jesus; yet we are called equally to kneel – in word and in deed – in front of this *human* Jesus, God incarnate, God in-the-flesh.

That struck me at Boars Head, but it should capture us all the time, as we consider how extraordinary it is that God comes to us this way, and what it means to say that this Jesus has authority for us.

What does it mean that we give incarnation authority? What does it mean that we give *anything* authority? We placed on the bulletin cover an image from an earlier era. “Question authority.” Some of you will remember the genesis of that button. Vietnam. Watergate. The moments and the spirit captured so well in the movie “The Post.” Question authority?

So to say that Jesus has authority feels audacious, and counter-cultural, and risky, because to say that means to say that other things, or people, or forces, DO NOT have authority, which is also audacious, and counter-cultural, and risky. But say it we do, imperfectly and incompletely, that not only do we believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our Lord, but that we kneel before him, literally rarely and symbolically frequently, kneel before one who is weak and vulnerable and very human, God incarnate.

What does that mean? Our gospel lesson from Mark gives us a clue. Jesus enters the synagogue to teach. The crowd was astounded. We know what that looks like – a teacher or a coach or a politician or even a preacher who grabs the crowd or the congregation and astounds them. Mark tells us that “he taught them as one having *authority*, and not as the scribes.”

This is funny to me, that scribe business. So many empty words, spoken by so many so-called authorities. Jesus was different.

Then a man in the synagogue acts up, a man with an unclean spirit. We don't know exactly what that meant, that unclean spirit, perhaps a psychosis of some kind or a form of disruptive behavior. He cried out. And Jesus tells him to be silent. And he is, and the unclean spirit leaves him. Again, the crowd is amazed. “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

- Authority – to teach.
- Authority – to heal.
- Authority – to break down barriers.
- Authority – to include.
- Authority – to confront authority.

If he has authority, this is what it looks like, in human form, and our calling is to listen, to follow, to emulate, to model, to make incarnate in our lives this incarnation, to kneel down when appropriate, but also to stand up, to speak out. Jesus, this Jesus, in human, flesh and blood form, has authority. That is an affirmation from our tradition that we re-state now, because it is important. It is important on its own terms but it is important for other reasons.

There are implications to incarnation. If incarnation has authority because of who Jesus is, if God came to us in fully human form, that means we must take incarnation seriously as we encounter every human who is *not* Jesus, all of them, all of us, created in the image of God. We do not kneel before other humans, of course – one God is enough. But we engage them as if they were Jesus.

That means at least two things. It means we take our own incarnation seriously. When we look in the mirror, we are called to remind ourselves of our inherent, God-given value. We matter. You matter. This is important to affirm in this #metoo moment, in this bullying culture. You matter regardless of age or weight, color or gender, mental health or physical health, Patriots or Eagles. You matter because you are an illustration of incarnation. Tell yourself that, every day, and let no one tell you otherwise. This is a theological truth, that because God came to us in human form, because God looked like us, we matter. Believe it, and believe it especially when it is most difficult to believe, when you are facing all those things, all those forces, that make such belief so difficult. Remember: you matter.

And because you matter, then others matter as well, just as much, no more, but no less. It has to be that way. Believe it, and believe it especially because right now our world is making it so hard to believe. Toxicity. Divisiveness. Political and cultural and even religious. I was sitting in a hotel lobby a few weeks ago and two men, “conservatives,” apparently, were speaking about “liberals” in such derisive terms, as if they were from another planet, though I bet they would talk about people from another planet with more civility and respect. And it’s not just conservative to liberal. It flows the other way, and, in fact, the harmfulness flows in all directions. As it continues, our cultural and moral fabric decays. It is not good civics and it is not good theology.

How does incarnation matter, here, as we look at the other, the stranger, the same way we would look at Jesus? As always, the Bible gives us a clue. Paul wrote to the conflicted congregation in Corinth. The nature of the division was food, but not really. Paul knew there were no idols, so anyone sacrificing food to idols was sacrificing to an illusion. But not everyone

in the community understood that, many different beliefs and experiences as this new church was being born. “Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled...” Paul was saying to those who knew to let love trump knowledge, that is, let sensitivity to the other trump what you knew to be true. Honor the other. “We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak....if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

What Paul is saying, Rick Morley writes, is that “while the meat is technically OK to eat, if it hurts the faith of other people—if it damages the spiritual health of other members of the Body—then Christians have a duty to forego the meat, and help out their brothers and sisters in Christ.” In Christian community, there can be meat eaters and non-meat eaters. But when those practices divide, love, and not correct belief, takes center stage. Meat is the example then, and often scholars use alcohol consumption as the example now – how those who may drink are sensitive to those who do not.

But it goes deeper than that. It means there can be no “others” in the church. It means we do all we can to resist the strong forces in our culture, to “otherize” the other, to reduce those who are different than us, who believe differently, to something less than the fully God-created people they are. It is such a slippery slope, to vilify and demonize and dehumanize, particularly in this toxic environment. But whether in church or culture, we who kneel before love incarnate, we who take baptism seriously, can’t give in to that temptation.

Does that mean we don’t protest, or resist, or hold strong opinions strongly? Heavens no! But it does mean that how we protest and resist matters, that how we question any authority *but* Jesus will reflect what we believe *about* Jesus. We can’t become what we criticize, we can’t succumb to that temptation, or we become what Paul calls a “stumbling block,” and true human community will not happen.

This is what we seek: authority, exercised in community, because of incarnation. An ethic of incarnation.

We look in the mirror and see Jesus. We look at the other and see Jesus. And we live accordingly.

When we do, life in the church will be blessed. When we do, public life will be transformed. For us, it begins with a tiny baby before whom we kneel, and it ends at the cross with that same baby grown to be a man, God incarnate, who will die, truly die, because he is willing to place his authority in service to the community, who is willing to define his authority by love. No question about it. Amen.