

Authority and Fear

January 5, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

We are here,
as winter slows us with bitter cold,
and bright landscapes and slippery roads,
to worship, that is, to pause for a time,
to go deeper, struggle with questions
which find their home in our hearts,
questions which call to us to deeper loving.

And so, bearing witness *both* to our world as it is, *and* as Love can imagine it, we would claim that vision of a just world in our own lives. And because of a growing sense of kinship with all beings, inviting our compassion, we begin in this celebration to engage our mission with our whole lives: body, mind, and heart.

Praising #123 Spirit of Life

Gathering What Is This? And How Do You Know?

What is this? A turtle? Wonder if I told you it was a lion?
No? How do you know it's not a lion?
What is this? A piece of pie? How do you
know? Have you ever tasted pie like this before?
Does this look like what you have tasted?
What is this? A car? But it says right here, "This is NOT a car."
Here is a much harder question...
What is this? Is this a young woman?
Or is this my great grandmother Ersilia?

Greeting news of the congregation

Devotion: Welcoming Memory and Hope
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Affirming **#1056 Thula Klizeo**
(with spoken words between repetitions)
a. Be still my heart. I am at home here.
b. At home in my own authority to say yes, or no.
c. Heart and mind are not at war in my home.
d. They teach each other. They learn. They hold hands and dance and sing.

Communing the Sequence,

Everyone in the world I call home
has a face; behind that face, a story
in which is threaded grief and love,
aggravation and joy, and a sense of self
which may be, as some Buddhists
and brain-scientists say,
something of a illusion, but which
I, at least, find to be a pretty darn convincing one.
The cashier at the Kroger's has a face;
she wishes me Happy New Year with a smile.
The amazing guy named Nonstop dancing, via a YouTube video,
right on top the Great Wall of China has a face.
My own face opens like a rose when I see him move like that.
The guy at the top of the freeway exit
holding a cardboard sign in hopes of surviving the cold has a face. A bit
scruffy, you're right, but a face. With a rather defeated "I am" behind
his eyes.
The woman in Malaysia who packed the little Star Trek plastic toy my
son gave me as part of his Christmas gift has a face too, but I will never
see it.
The 36-year-old woman, giving birth to her daughter right now at
Riverside, has a face. She will gaze upon her daughter's face for the first
time soon enough.
The guy who used his gun to hold up the Speedway gas station on
Cleveland Ave, night before last, has a face too; no mask covering it.
The store camera reveals someone who resembles a movie star.
The transgender teen in Newark has a face, a beautiful one she sees in
the mirror each day.
A very, very smart guy in German Village, who nevertheless shoots
heroin almost every night, has a face too.
And whether each face finds a shelter, a home, in one place or another,
under a roof like this, or in a shelter, or under Southern constellations
few in Ohio have seen, or in a building like this, silence, at one time or
another, receives all of us who look out from our faces and then look at
the deeper face behind our eyelids.....

silence

Everyone in our lives has a face.
Even if they are no longer with us, their faces often rise up in our
memories and float over our hearts like guiding stars. So we give names
to these faces now... the tender faces, the courageous faces, the
supportive faces, the challenging faces, and missed faces, the

remembered faces. Silently within our hearts, or within this room, we make the sound that is their names...

naming

Those who play trombone and piano have faces too, and right now they are set on performing the rather vibrant miracle we call music right before our very eyes.

the Music Sonata for Trombone by Benedetto Marcello
Tony McDonald, trombone

First Reading *Judith Butler's Precarious Life, 2004, has been an influential book in the life of the mind for a decade now. I will quote from it today, and also next week. Ms. Butler is talking about the controlling, but unnamed, authority of the media in shaping our response to crucial issues. She wrote these words during the post 9/11 war on Iraq.*

In the initial campaign of the war against Iraq, the United States government advertised its military feats as a *visual* phenomenon. That the US government called this a “shock and awe” strategy suggests that they were producing a visual spectacle that numbs the senses, and, like the sublime itself, puts out of play the very capacity to think. This production takes place not only for the Iraqi population on the ground, but also for the consumers of war who rely on CNN and Fox, the network that regularly interspersed its war coverage with the claim that it is the “most trust-worthy” news source on the war.

But graphic photos of US soldiers, dead, and photos of children maimed and killed by US bombs, were both refused by the mainstream media, and supplanted with footage that always took an *aerial* view, a view whose perspective is established and maintained by state power. And yet, the moment the bodies executed by the Hussein regime were uncovered, they made the front page of the New York Times, since *those* bodies must be grieved. The outrage over their deaths motivated the war effort.

In the Vietnam war, it was the pictures of children dying from napalm that brought the U.S. public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse and grief. These were pictures we were not supposed to see. These images pointed beyond themselves, to a life and to a precariousness they could not show. It was from a sense of the precariousness of those lives we destroyed that many US citizen began to develop an important consensus against the war. But if the media will not run those pictures, and if those lives remain unnamable and ungrievable, if they do not appear in their destruction, we will not be moved.

The Second Reading *is a Pericope, that is, a section from Gospel of Mark 11: 27-35 c. 71 CE. This is the first of the five books that give us a glimpse of the life of the Jewish teacher Yeshu bar Maryam, or Jesus, Mary's son. The author's actual name is unknown, but he has been called Mark since the middle of the second century. This particular extract from the book is one of the cleverest satires on traditional concepts of authority that has come down to us from the ancient world. The John in this passage is John the*

Baptist, an historical figure who is still worshipped as a prophet greater than Jesus in parts of Syria.

Then when they were back in Jerusalem once again, as they were walking through the Temple plaza, the ranking clergy came up to him and demanded, "Show us your credentials. Who authorized you to speak like you do, and act like you do?"

Jesus responded, "Tell you what. I'll ask you a question first. Answer it, and then in return I'll present my credentials. Here is my question: The ritual of immersion which John used to offer out by the Jordan River—who authorized it? Was it blest by heaven or was it only a human invention? Tell me."

They were on the spot, and they knew it. They pulled back into a huddle and whispered to each other, "If we say 'heaven,' he'll ask us why we didn't undergo John's baptism ritual; if we say it was just a human invention, we'll be up against it with the people here in the temple because they all seem to hold John up as a great prophet." They decided to concede that round to Jesus. "We don't know," they said.

Jesus replied, "Well then, I won't answer your question either."

Interlude: *Intermezzo in e minor Op. 116 no. 5**

Preaching Fear of Authority ...in Others, In Ourselves Rev. Mark Belletini

So, early in December I get a letter in the mail from the BMV, that is, the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles. It began with large letters, to wit, "Notice of Suspension," in a rectangular frame. Then, in much smaller lettering, it told me I had to send proof of insurance to their office for my vehicle, or otherwise lose all driving privileges for *three* years.

My eyeballs popped out of their sockets, like in a cartoon. In my hands was a simmering threat, lobbed like a grenade, into my mailbox, by a state bureau with the authority to do as it wants.

The car in question is a car that I technically own, but which is driven by a good friend who I have mentioned many times, a guy who got into trouble a couple of times when he was 18, and who will now, according to Ohio law, live with those felonies as a straight-jacket around his life for the rest of his days. Fourteen years ago I decided to help him to get some wheels, for he is a good man, a good father, a good athlete, and a good friend.

The BMV listed several ways of proving insurance coverage, true. But the tone of their letter felt accusatory to me..."Notice of Suspension" is like a smack in the face. It opened up the part of my soul that feels reactive fear in the presence of certain kinds of unquestionable authority. I wasn't even able to respond to the letter for a few days because I was so put out by its tone. The small print several paragraphs down told me it was just a routine thing, but all I could feel was a threat.

This reactive fear felt shameful after a while. I think it brought back all the conflicts I had with larger authorities in the past...the IRS, for example. I had proof positive that they made a mistake, not me, but it took eight months of daily phone calls and Xeroxes from me, and threatening letters from them, to resolve the issues. Thankfully, my proof was indeed proof. They were the ones who made the mistake this time. Not that anyone on the phone even said "Sorry" when it was finally resolved.

Right after I put the letter to the BMV in the mail, my sister called and told me that the men and women who did my brother-in-law's cataract surgery botched it, and that his eye had been swollen and purple for a week. Sure enough, when he went back in to complain that he couldn't read anymore, they looked at the measurements they had used, and discovered they had misread the digits somehow, and were off by 73 points, whatever that means.

So now, my brother-in-law is reacting with pure terror to the idea of getting it fixed..."if such a thing is even possible." His sense of the reliable authority of the man who did his surgery has been diminished, even though he did great on the left. And this is his right eye, for goodness sake, not something about which anyone might say, "Oh, well...better luck next time."

Of course, millions of people did not get threatening letters in the mail from the BMV during December. And for everyone I have talked with, at least in this congregation, who has had cataract surgery, it went so smoothly and successfully that I hear nothing but grateful kudos afterward. Authority is not crumbling willy-nilly all over the place.

And mistakes as I often say, are just part of life. I have made them. You have made them. Doctors have made them. The police have made them. Bishops have made them. Writers have made them. I haven't met an errorless person yet.

But while mistakes by some authority might make us nervous and fearful about their authority for a time, authority loses far more when it goes off in a direction no one saw coming. I remember that both of my parents were undone for years once the authorities of the Roman church decided that you didn't have to fast from meat on Fridays anymore. "We've been doing this for a thousand years," my father ranted with great frustration. "How can they say that to eat meat is a serious sin one day, and not a sin the next day. What's wrong with these people?"

And of course, something similar has been happening to the very authority of the United States government with all the reports about the NSA, that is, the National Security Agency. The accusations of spying, not just on German and Brazilian presidents, but on the citizenry of our own nation, has left many of us confused. Probably some of the accusations, at least, are questionable, because pundits are stretching the meaning of those accusations all over the place like sticky political taffy.

You have all seen the famous bumper sticker "Question Authority." I told you once that it was the brain child of a Unitarian Universalist back in the 1960s. Someone with great

authority in my life assured me that was so. But, if you go on-line, seven other origin stories are proclaimed, all of them insisting *they* have the authoritative version. Why? Because they say so. As I often say, hard evidence is found even less on the internet than in Guantanamo.

But no matter who composed the simple bumper sticker, some Unitarian Universalist, who bows to neither bishop, council, synod, patriarch, or singular Holy Book as the final authority, certainly *could* have written it.

But this hardly means we Unitarian Universalists reject the word "authority" outright. We question authority...only as it is imposed from the outside with little knowledge of our community as it is. Only when it is bullying.

Our historic practice, in fact, for hundreds of years, has been to *share* authority among our whole membership. This is mostly through our elected leadership. And frankly, this has worked very well in the years I have been here. I have loved working with our elected officers and Board members. The sharing is real, the support for each other and for the whole congregation bespeaks dedication. Often I am moved by our meetings, and the care shown to each other. And although the capacity for shared authority is granted by election, it is also validated, earned and made real by thoughtful and honorable practice of that authority. Honed leadership abilities, and cooperative practices *verify* authority. Staff and lay leaders are working authoritatively together, with mutual support and deep love for this place and its people and mission.

But this *question authority* bumper sticker, no matter who came up with it, does show clear evidence of being crafted in the 1960s. All seven origin stories agree it arose in the era of the Vietnam War.

And Judith Butler very clearly tells us what affected the ending of that war. It was citizens here in the States finally seeing in magazines and on television the broken faces of children in a napalm-destroyed land, faces that had not been visible at the beginning of the war when our presence in South-East Asia consisted of only a few "advisors." In 1965 soldiers were sent, and they saw the violence of war first hand, saw the faces first hand, had their hearts broken first hand. Many of them were never the same again in body or spirit after what they saw.

But because Stateside journalists were a bit bolder then, they began to make the invisible visible. They did this so that people in Omaha, or Bangor, or Columbus could also see the faces which the soldiers had seen. And eventually, Butler says, we began as a citizenry to *question the authority* that led to this war, in her words, "a consensus against that war began to coalesce around outrage and grief." Yes, true, some people, especially at the universities, had been against the war from the beginning. But not as many as you might think. Many of our own congregations were divided by it, different factions claiming different authorities in support of their view. But in the end, those who had originally been for the war began to change their mind, because of what they saw. The faces. The tears. The misery. Seeing changes everything, as the returning soldiers knew in their very

bodies.

But, Butler cautions us, the authorities that be learned their lesson. So during the recent Iraq war, we were given only aerial views of all the bombings. No faces. No children.

This time, the press and media cooperated with this separation of the war-dead into those who could be grieved, and those who could not be grieved. When Hussein's killings were unearthed, the venerable, trustworthy New York Times itself, says Butler, posted the horrific pictures on the front page, because, she says, "The outrage over their deaths *motivated* the war effort." The media have great authority indeed over how we see the world.

Authority. We usually use our own authority to make decisions, literally, to *author* decisions. That authority is most often based on real experience, much of it based on the experience of seeing with our own eyes. If we see a car sitting in the parking lot, and someone in a graduate gown and doctoral hood comes up and tells us with urgent passion and conviction that it's *not* a car, but a *pineapple*, we don't believe him. No matter how convincing this guy is, quoting Nietzsche in German and Kierkegaard in Danish, our eyes have seen both cars and pineapples before, and we can tell the difference.

This idea that seeing, by eye or by fingers, changes things, and bestows us our authority, is a terrifying concept to many, which is why Biblical literalists, young earth creationists, holocaust deniers, race-baiters, anti-Semites and anti-Muslims, and theocratic politicians are so loud, panicked and powerful. To see the world as it actually is frightens them, and knocks their own authority – scripture, party line, natural law etc. – out of the ball park. I have no fantasy that these folks will evaporate either.

But nevertheless, I hope that most of us who claim some authority in our lives – parents, a board member, a PTA leader, a judge, lawyer, doctor, dentist, nurse, mechanic, professor, psychologist, minister, etc. – don't claim the authority we claim as something infallible, never assailed by doubt or fear. I have often been doubtful and fearful, both as a parent and as a minister, when I have had to make tough decisions, especially since few decisions are 100/0, that is, perfectly clear. Most of them are 30/70 or even 40/60. I can often even see both sides of an issue. But my election by this congregation back in 1998 has given me the strength to make decisions that are tough, even as my knees clatter together. I don't have to do that often, mind you, but I've not gotten any less fearful over the years. It's a good fear, mind you, a healthy one. But I lose sleep in those days.

Why? Because my authority is not a simple thing. There are always competing authorities in everyone's life..."My grandma always used to say..." "My economics professor used to hold that..." "What if what I say makes her mad? I want her affection...yet I have to tell the truth, right?" Is telling the truth a higher authority than the need to be loved? Different authorities pull at our behavior. And it's true...if my grandmother said something to me that I found truthful...even if she was wrong...my adoration of her will not easily allow me to let go of what she says, even if the evidence is scanty.

It's this complexity about the multiple authorities in our lives that makes taking *on* authority, or bowing *to* authority, a source of honest doubt and fearfulness. Good doubtfulness, mind you. Good fear.

The story from the gospel of Mark points this out perfectly. The high ranking religious leaders in the Temple of the day were skeptics by our standards and by their own people's standards. They didn't believe in life after death, they didn't believe in angels, or that human beings had a supernatural soul, they didn't believe in upstart prophets like John the Baptist who found the desert more likable than the Temple run by them. These are the priests, the story goes, who interrogate Jesus. "Show us your credentials! By what authority do you do and say all these things?" they demand. What they were actually saying was something like this: "Look at our white linen robes. We're the authorities around here. We think you're just another credulous anti-authoritarian fanatic like that guy in the desert."

So Jesus...and I have to see him smirking a bit here...returns with this. "I'll answer your question if you answer mine. Do you think John's ritual of immersion, or baptism, was something sacred, approved by heaven? Or did he just make up this little ritual all by himself to take people in?" In other words, "tell me if he is a true prophet, or just another charlatan."

They immediately know they've lost. Why? Because to say he was a prophet would expose them as two-faced for not getting immersed themselves, and thus undermining their own claimed authority completely. But if they said, "the guy was a charlatan," the people before them, who definitely thought otherwise, would have pelted them with insults, and, once again, they would lose all their authority. The only thing they could do was retreat. And even in doing that, they lost a lot of their authority...for authority without clear principles is simply bullying. Their real authority was not their G-d, as they claimed, but rather three other things: 1. fear of the crowd's opinions, 2. fear of appearing foolish to their fellow skeptics, and 3. fear of this bonafide hick from the Galilee who had done them in neatly...with a truly *unmistakable* authority of his own. It's the kind of authority shown by anyone who refuses to play games. It's the kind of authority who questions the authority of those who do not tremble in some fear when they go about questioning the credentials of everyone else, without producing any of their own.

You see, I think it's actually ok to be a bit fearful in claiming authority for oneself, even if one is appointed, as the ranking priests were, by the local Roman governor, not the people. This fear is a good fear, not a reactive one. The fear does not in any way keep you from acting with authority; but it *does* help to clarify the questions you are facing. It helps you to ask "What's really going on here?" Am I seeing what I am seeing, or what I have been taught to see by some unnamed authority I am not admitting? Am I afraid I will not be liked if I make a tough decision about a child, a student, a patient, a rowdy in the court? Does my decision serve the dignity of the authority entrusted in me, and the institution, child, patient or client who trusts me?

My brother-in-law being cautious and fearful about getting his eye fixed is understandable. For a while, his faith has been shaken. His eye hurts, and is swollen. But he also knows that a medical professional's authoritative decisions for how to fix the problem will have to be accepted eventually.

And when I sent the letter and credentials back to the BMV, I did send an enclosure letting them see *my* face, verbally at least, on getting a letter the first week in December that began with the phrase, "Notice of Suspension," followed only then by the outline of what I needed to do to comply with a rule I had never heard of before, even though I never missed an insurance payment once. I started off with reactive fear, but I have moved passed that. And I want to guard my doubt and honest fear as beautiful gifts anytime I need to act with authority.

Integration: <i>Recommitting to Our Mission</i>
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Offering

An opportunity to reinforce what is important to us, and invest in the ideals and principles we share. Your generous contribution allows our congregation to transform lives and impact the world around us.

Whether it's the learning of our children,
the insights of our various circle groups,
the meditative joy of weeding, the shared
potluck of First Friday, the music program,
the justice-work opportunities, or just a place
where we can come midweek and sit
in silence for a time, this, our common house of life and love, thrives
because of generosity in time, thoughtfulness and treasure.
May we now share the responsibility for this house, as we
share the authority for co-creating its
welfare, and living out its mission.

*Intermezzo in e minor Op. 119 no. 2**

Returning

What Is This? Prayer

What is this place, O Love,
with a golden ceiling, louvered doors,
clerestory windows and purple chairs?
Who are these faces beside us,
who remember things about us,
who sometimes let our names slip,
but who are clearly glad that we're here?
With whom do we share the planet
of our birth, the homeland that stretches
from this place to both poles,

from this place to the swelling equator?
What are these sounds we sing,
these questions we ask, indeed,
the breaths that we breathe,
if they are not our struggle to recognize a
common home for all of our hearts?

Singing **#309 Earth Is Our Homeland**

Blessing

**All solo piano selections are by Johannes Brahms.*