

The Way of Authority

The year was 1995, the place, Adrian, Michigan. It was an important time in my life as I was going to be ordained an elder in the United Methodist Church. Back in my day, you were first ordained a deacon and then an elder. I was the last one to be ordained that day because of my last name, Zundel. There were 22 others before me and I was kneeling the whole time. I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to walk when my name was called.

But then my name was called and I came forward and knelt in front of the bishop at the time, Bishop Donald A. Ott. The district superintendents all surrounded me and laid hands on me as the bishop said these words. Almighty God, pour upon Jill Hardt Zundel, the Holy Spirit, for the office and work of an elder in Christ's holy church. Amen.

But it was the next part that really shook me. The bishop looked directly into my eyes and spoke these words, "Jill Hardt Zundel, take authority as an elder to preach the Word of God, to administer the Holy Sacraments and to order the life of the Church, in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was a powerful moment but one I kind of tucked in the back of my mind. I knew I was an elder of the church and I knew I was supposed to preach, do communion and baptize, and do the administration of the church. But it was that word "authority" that I kind of left on the stage of Dawson Auditorium in Adrian College. I was given authority by the bishop on behalf of the whole church, but didn't pick that up with the rest of my ordination orders that day.

Why? I guess because at the time, I was still young, still naïve and didn't realize how and when to use my authority in the name of the church. I've told you time and time again about my first church and how it was not a good appointment and I hadn't found my voice or honed in on my authority as an elder in the church. I went to therapy, to a therapist who actually specialized in working with clergy. I wanted to know how I could not be anyone's doormat anymore. I wanted to know how to claim my voice.

We worked for a while and I had to really look at my self esteem issues and why wasn't I claiming my authority as an elder in the church. It's now been 31 years of ordained ministry, both as a deacon and then as an elder, and as I have grown in my ministry, so has my understanding of taking that authority to move the church forward and to vision with the church to where God is calling us to go.

As we talk about authority, a question I want to ask is what makes a good leader? What are the attributes of a good leader? I heard a wonderful quote that says "A leader with no one following them is just a person out for a walk." In other words, the first mark of a leader is that there are people following them. If no one's following, you're not leading.

How about the matter of authority? Where does true authority come from? You could argue that authority automatically comes with one's position. For example, because of their position in the family, a parent has automatic authority over their children. By virtue of their position, a manager or supervisor usually has authority over the hourly employee. But if that hourly employee goes on to become a police officer, and happens to pull their former supervisor over for speeding, guess who has the authority now?

Position and title give some people a certain amount of automatic authority over others, but true authority rarely comes by way of position, title or even rank.

There's a wonderful scene in the film "The King's Speech" that demonstrates this fact. The movie shows a portion of the life of King George VI, king of Britain, who found himself thrust onto the throne when his older brother abdicated for love. The problem was that from an early age, he suffered from a stammer. And as king, he'll be expected to give lots of speeches, both in public and on the radio. And so he hires a speech therapist to help him lose the stammer.

This scene takes place the night before his coronation. He's there to rehearse with his therapist but just minutes before, he was informed that the therapist isn't, in fact, a doctor. He has no official schooling, and the king, who goes by Bertie to his family, feels hoodwinked and is angry because he has no official credentials...other than a high success rate of his patients.

The king put stock in the authority of position – including his own. But he soon learned that his friend and therapist's authority came from his ability to cure stammering despite not having any initials behind his name.

Our Saint that is walking with us on our way today is Mary McLeod Bethune. She was born in 1875, and was an American Educator, stateswoman, philanthropist, humanitarian and civil rights activist best known for starting a private school for African-American students in Daytona Beach, FL.

Most of her siblings were born into slavery, so she knew injustice and poverty firsthand. But life couldn't keep her down; there was no way she was going to let society dictate her course in life.

I don't have nearly enough time to go into her extraordinary life, other than to say that she took life by the horns and worked for what was most important to her, which was equality for African-Americans. No doubt she was an inspiration to those who came later, and headed up the civil rights movement.

As an adult, she ended up becoming a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, someone who had both influence and wealth. In her later years, the school she began in Daytona Beach eventually became a college, and Bethune became its first president.

One of the great leadership qualities of Bethune was her ability to advance her school, even though she hardly had a penny to her own name. When it came to maintaining the physical building, Bethune salvaged and repurposed items that others threw away, considering money the least important resource in her work. And yet, she solicited funding from some of the most wealthy Americans in her day.

And the fact is, not only did she raise a ton of money through the years through her friendships with some of the wealthiest people of her day, but she also wielded a level of influence and authority that was utterly unheard of by a woman of color in her day.

And here's why. Mary McLeod Bethune's authority was not an inherited status or a position that she bought with money or earned with an advanced degree. She had moral authority. She never showed partiality to one group over another.

In *The Way of Poverty*, we talked about St. Francis' approach – just give up on money altogether! Mary McLeod Bethune took a different approach; give people the opportunity to financially support a ministry without giving them control over the ministry. In fact, she took it a step further. Bethune didn't simply keep givers in their place, refusing gifts with strings attached – she used the relationships she formed with the rich and powerful to put her words into their ears.

She enjoyed teaching and spending time with poor black children, fearless faced white opponents, even converting them through loving welcome, and confidently walked into the white house to advise the President and First Lady.

She was undaunted by obstacles, and did what was right, regardless of who or what stood in her way. In the 1920s, she even faced down the KKK, who were trying to stop her from registering Black Voters in Florida. She had true authority, the kind granted to someone on account of a life of integrity and a commitment to doing what's right no matter what.

Let's switch gears now. Where does a church's authority and influence lie within a community such as our own? Down through the years, I've heard lots of long time church goers lament the fact that churches no longer enjoy the level of automatic influence and authority they once had.

It is no longer the case that the general public respects a pastor, or people active in their church simply on account of the fact they're Christian. If I had a dime for every time someone complained about the fact that Wednesdays and Sundays are no longer respected by school and other youth sports organizations, I could be a donor to Mary McLeod Bethune's school. The fact is that the authority of the position the church once enjoyed is no longer there. In some ways, we lost it on our own; and in other ways, it's just the result of our ever changing culture.

So, if the church no longer has automatic authority and influence within a community, where does it come from? Wouldn't we all agree that we want to have an influence on the people of Detroit? If so, then what will make people listen to us?

First of all, we can't make anyone listen to us. Respect can't be forced...and it can't be bought. And by that I mean, people these days couldn't care less if a church's membership includes those who are socially, politically, and commercially connected in the community. Maybe there was a day when it meant something that the mayor or police chief was a member of such and such a church, but not anymore. When I served as associate pastor at Clarkston UMC, which was the church of greatest importance in that community, every election season, we had new candidates all of a sudden showing up to worship at the church. That doesn't work any more. People don't connect with a church because someone important happens to go there. Influence and authority can't be forced or bought.

But it can be earned. I have a colleague who gets quoted more times than I can remember. Every church he serves grows, so he knows what he's talking about. He says, "People don't come to your church because you give them free stuff, they'll come to your church when they hear that you give away free stuff." That's because people want to be a part of a church they know is making a true impact upon the lives of the people in the community. When word gets out about the ways a church is transforming lives, it gets people's attention. Therein lies true authority and influence. It's how Mary McLeod Bethune rolled and it's how today's growing churches roll.

Listen to author Audrey Warren describe how her church threw away the playbook and attempted to meet the people where they were at. She writes:

"I served in a community that included a large number of immigrant families. Every day many of these men would gather at a central location with the hope of being employed for the day. Many were new to the United States and most were living day to day. The church began a ministry called Café en La Calle. These Monday morning gatherings became as consistent as the Sunday morning services that had happened 24 hours earlier. Members of the church along with the pastor, would prepare coffee and food to share as these men gathered. Individuals could write down prayer requests and put them in a prominently displayed box. At times, there were deep conversations about family and faith. Café de La Calle became a way of sharing the faith in new ways and in a new place among new people.

In our reading from the book of James, James comes down hard on the church for overlooking the poor among them, whether it happens consciously or unconsciously. He makes it clear that our primary mission field is not those who can increase our coffers with their generosity, but those to whom we can be generous with our love and presence.

He says it this way in verse 8 "You do well when you truly fulfill the royal law found in scripture, Love your neighbor as yourself." Loving them, serving them, finding out who they are, and what their needs are and then doing what we can to help them – that's when a church starts to be noticed and heard and listened to. I believe the degree to which we find ways to minister to the people who aren't here will be the measure of our moral authority and influence. For the church of Jesus Christ, the way of authority is the way of grace. And the way of grace is the way of authority.

As a church, what are we all about? It's what we started working on yesterday in our visioning work. Our task or our mission is to cultivate and build up people. Specifically, so that they might come to know the love of Jesus Christ.

And it's also to assist those of us who have faith in Christ so that we might continue to grow in our discipleship.

But let's be very clear about something. Our primary mission field is not ourselves. God placed us here for the purpose of serving others. Woodward and Adams may be where we gather to worship and where we gather in classrooms to learn and where we sometimes gather to serve. But our mission field and focus are the people out there.

Just as Mary McLeod Bethune was driven by a vision of educating African American boys and girls so that they might have the same opportunities their white peers enjoyed, this church is driven by a vision of a community transformed by the love and grace of Jesus Christ, with the result that marriages are

strengthened; grieving people have a place to heal; students do better in school, teachers and community activists feel supported; parents are resourced with all sorts of help; those struggling with homelessness feel connected and cared for; those with addictions come into freedom; families have fun together, all while faith in Jesus Christ is on the rise.

My hope is that this is something you want to be a part of. And my prayer is that this is something you're not just committed to supporting, but truly excited to help make a reality.

Today, we are led by the Saints that were a part of our congregation. Those who have been cheering us on and those who have gone on to glory in the past year. We remember Christopher Roddie who had the voice of authority whenever he read scripture, more notably was a door man and made people all over this city feel welcomed and cherished.

Lois Rutt, who moved shortly after I came here. I became attached to her immediately as she had the kind of personality that just cherished everyone she met. Rebecca shared with me a story about Lois Rutt that I have to share. When you all hosted the rotating shelter here, Lois decided that they should make a healthy meal for the guests spending the night. So she made a healthy oatmeal and veggie stuffed meatloaf. One of the guests asked "What the hell is this?" So the next year she gave money to order pizza for all the guests instead.

Karen Fitzpatrick, a quiet saint of the church who served on our board of Trustees and made sure we put railings up so that those with mobility issues could still participate in worship. She worked with Dee on the United Tenant Council of Councils as well.

Paula Allen, who played the bells and had funky hair before I even dared to have purple hair. She also kept our finances in order as a counter for our offerings.

Dorothy Roddie, A dedicated Methodist who didn't always like the pastor but was always faithful to the church. Was an usher, a peanut seller, a seamstress and a beloved mother to her children. She always welcomed me into her home with dignity and grace.

Rosemary Tyler, who was a singer in our Ensemble and played the bells and wanted everyone to know she was a PK, a pastor's kid. She believed in education as a teacher and told all her children that they would go to college. Her smile was infectious. When I think of her I think of Joy.

Rev. Dr. Richard Devor, a pastor who served Central well. in 1977, he pushed to have the Metropolitan Community Church, a church focused on showing God's love specifically to the LGBTQIA community, housed here when they were a church without a building. So many other stories I know you all could share about him.

All those saints took authority to move this church forward. So where do we fit in on the path.

If you haven't heard, we are redeveloping our space here. This is not like before when we tried and we failed, or put it on hold or couldn't figure out the next steps. It is really going to happen. And we need you on board. We need you to be engaged. Today, after worship, we will gather on the 4th floor to hear from our developing partner, Full Circle. You will hear how far we are in our development and what our next steps will be. You will also be able to have your questions answered as best we can, and your concerns can be lifted up and addressed.

We have claimed our authority over this place for over 200 years in ministry. We can't stop and we won't stop. We will be that shining light throughout downtown to show that we will not be moved to another place, just because some millionaires feel uncomfortable with who we welcome all through the week. We are claiming our authority on the corner of Woodward and Adams and we will remain for years and years to come.