

By What Authority?

October 1, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-27

By what authority? It's a good question. A question that gets asked at interesting times, at vulnerable times. Is authority something you are granted? Or something you claim? Where does it come from? How does authority shape our conversations and our community?

Last Sunday, our guest preacher the Rev. Liz Walker said that she was not a "lectionary girl" and preached on an Easter text on a September Sunday. I didn't grow up with the lectionary either. I grew up in Minneapolis, surrounded by Lutherans and Catholics, in a large congregational church that was and is very proud of its heritage of the "Congregational Way." In fact, our confirmation class spent a whole year on the history and theology of the Pilgrims and the Puritans, learning that we were a church based on a covenant not a creed, where each congregation had the authority and the responsibility to make its own decisions, following Christ and led by the Holy Spirit. Our congregation in Minnesota had not chosen to join the United Church of Christ when it was established in 1957 but had maintained its independence and autonomy. So, it makes sense that we didn't follow a schedule of bible readings set up by someone else, by an ecclesiastical authority! When I discovered the UCC in college here in New England, I also learned about the lectionary, and have come to love the surprises and connections it provides for us as we navigate through the church year. Like it has done again today.

As a part of our fall Regathering theme of honoring our spiritual ancestors, I thought we might explore a bit more of Anne Hutchinson's story. On this 18th Sunday after Pentecost, the lectionary has delivered us stories about leadership and authority. How appropriate! Two weeks ago, Dan outlined the story of the earliest years of our congregation. In 1629, some people from Salem had sailed a bit further south couldn't find good water in Charlestown, but found a natural spring across the river, began to build houses around it and named the new settlement Boston. John Winthrop arrived with his fleet in 1630 and within about three years, the English population of Boston had grown to about 4,000 residents. The town was gathered around the church, led by the Rev. John Wilson.

Then in the summer of 1633, the Griffin arrived in Boston carrying both the Rev. Thomas Hooker and the Rev. John Cotton. They no doubt had plenty of time to talk during the voyage -- and their ideas about theology and scripture and governance were quite different. John Cotton became the “teaching elder” at First Church in Boston, and then led the church while John Wilson returned to England to tend to some family business. Cotton’s ideas were different – he placed more emphasis on what he called the “covenant of grace” – that people could be saved by direct revelation from God. This was very different from the “Covenant of Works”, which focused on the belief that our actions could earn salvation.

Anne Marbury Hutchinson had been a follower of John Cotton’s in England. She and her husband William would travel quite a distance to hear preachers in the area – the “Woman of Ely” and John Cotton. Their ideas resonated with her own. Anne would participate in small groups that would gather in people’s homes to discuss the sermon, and eventually she began to lead the groups herself. Then, in the summer of 1634, the Hutchinsons and 11 of their children set sail for Boston, excited to be following John Cotton. During the two-month voyage, Anne was not quiet. She held women’s meetings and argued theology with the Rev. Zechariah Symmes. She taught that personal revelation from God was as authoritative in a person’s life as was the Bible. Anne had made such a name for herself on the voyage, that her admission to the Boston church was delayed by a week as the elders continued to question her.

The Hutchinsons were granted a half-acre of land near the corner of Washington and School Streets in Boston and built a two-story house across the street from John Winthrop. Anne was busy with her own family and as a midwife to the women in the community as they gave birth to the next generation of children. They would attend Mr. Cotton’s sermons on Sundays, and then Anne would host meetings in her house to discuss the sermon. At first, she recalled, there were 5 or 6 women. But soon, as John Winthrop wrote, there were “threescore or fourscore persons” came each week. He would know. He lived across the street!

When the town's merchants began rebelling against the authority of the church, they also gravitated toward the Hutchinsons. And they did not re-elect John Winthrop in 1634. The stability of the new community was threatened. By the time John Wilson returned in 1635, the Boston congregation was divided. So much so, that when John Wilson got up to pray or to preach, many of John Cotton's followers got up and left. Meanwhile, Thomas Hooker had gathered this congregation a bit further west in this spot on the Charles River. But there wasn't enough room for both Hooker and Cotton here, and in June 1636, he and about 100 members of this church continued further south and west to found Hartford Connecticut.

This church regathered under the leadership of the Rev. Thomas Shepard in 1636. Within a year, they were in the midst of the crisis of what to do about Anne Hutchinson and her followers. Thomas Hooker came back for Anne's trial on November 2, 1637. I wonder if he travelled back here with his 22-year-old daughter Joanna, who married Thomas Shepard in October, just before the trial. And we thought that we were busy! There has never been a dull year in the life of this congregation! The trial itself is a whole other story. I'm fascinated by Anne: intrigued by her confidence, and more than a bit unsettled by the role my ancestors (Hooker, Wilson, and Winthrop) played in the drama. At least I'm also descended from Roger Williams, who welcomed Anne and her family in Rhode Island after they were excommunicated and banished from the Colony! The question they all dealt with is a perennial one: where does authority come from? From God or from people? Is it a divine or a human construct?

While thinking about Anne's story over the past two weeks, I found it interesting when I opened the lectionary texts and found the story of the people struggling in the wilderness. I thought, this is the passage with the great verse "and the whole congregation complained." But it's not. That's in chapter 16. Re-reading it, in chapter 16, the whole congregation complained that they're hungry. God tells Moses, I'll send quails and manna and they can hunt and gather and have plenty every day.

Next chapter. Now they're thirsty. God could have said, I'll send rain and lead the people to a spring and they can fetch their water and drink. But no. God tells Moses to find a rock, and to take his elders with him, and to strike the rock with his staff. So now it's Moses who is the miracle worker, and his elders who have witnessed it. Moses who fixes the problem. Moses who saves the people. Would it

be a different story if the people had found a natural spring and had been able to draw their own water? Does it make a difference that one person, one leader was given the power to produce the water necessary for survival? Or is that just the way someone chose to tell the story?

The authorities of Jesus' day had the same fears. So, they asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things?" The Greek word for authority – εξουσία – means the power or freedom to do something. By what power or with what freedom are you doing these things? Jesus turned the question back to them: did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin? The way Matthew tells the story, Jesus refused to be confined by their question.

There's a connection between who writes the story and how the story is told. It reminds me of the last song in the Broadway musical Hamilton that repeats the refrain: "Who lives? Who dies? Who tells your story?"

In the story of New England, giving individuals the power and authority to vote for their leaders was a radically new idea in the new colony. It was very different than it had been in England. But Anne and her followers' insistence that God could speak directly to them was too much too soon for this "City Upon a Hill." The community desperately needed women to give birth and nurture strong and healthy children. But it wasn't ready for women's leadership in the public sphere. Or women's insistence that God spoke directly to them. The reason we know so much about the trial of Anne Hutchinson is that the men involved wrote it down. Word for word. In diaries and transcripts and sermons. But the women's stories were just as real.

We do have a few hints. In 1664, a woman who had been 21 at the time of the trial, and was the daughter of the man beat John Winthrop in 1634 in the election for Governor. Now, thirty years later, she wrote some words of advice to her son. Anne Dudley Bradstreet is known as America's first published female poet. In her *Meditations Divine and Morall*, she wrote that: "Authority without wisdom is like a heavy axe without an edge: fitter to bruise than polish." ¹

¹ Anne Bradstreet, "Meditations Divine and Morall" in *The Words of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Jeannine Hensley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 274.

May the voice of a woman who witnessed those early years empower us today, and encourage us to remember the words that aren't spoken, to tell the stories of everyone who was here, not just the English, but the others who lived on these lands. And may God's wisdom empower our authority, as God speaks to us, that we might understand the stories of our shared history with divine wisdom and with hope for the new day that is truly dawning. Amen!

