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“The Question of Authority”

Rev. D. Dulin

This past week was the sad anniversary of terrible violence committed a year ago in Tuscon, Arizona at a public event sponsored by Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. As you know, constituents had gathered that day in Tuscon to meet their congressional representative. Some were killed and others were badly injured by a mentally ill man with a gun. The injured included the congresswoman herself, and on the first anniversary of this horrific event, Giffords announced her resignation from congress. With a halting but strong voice, she spoke at the State of the Union gathering and melted everyone’s hearts. She has resigned from office, but has promised to return to public service.

Another victim of traumatic brain injury published a column in last Sunday’s “Oregonian.” Prior to her skiing accident, Elizabeth Hovde had provided frequent opinion pieces for the editorial pages of that newspaper. Following the accident at Mt. Hood Skibowl, Hovde spent time in a medically-induced coma, followed by lengthy and still ongoing therapy. I listened to an interview she gave on a local OPB Radio program several months ago; while her speech was quite a bit more fluid than Gabby Gifford’s has so far become, I could tell she was working to form her words. Hovde’s column last Sunday made the basic point that her accident and her subsequent process of recovery have taught her many things. Most of all, her accident and subsequent recovery have taught her the interconnectedness we all share, by design of our creator.

Gabby Giffords and Elizabeth Hovde both stand as examples of traumatic brain injury. Both provide an image of dedicated efforts to recover and regain strength. Both women credit their family, friends, and medical caregivers with giving the love and the

skilled care which have enabled them to come as far in their recovery as they have travelled to date. Giffords remains committed to the democratic process, and the connection which elected leaders need to have with their constituents. Hovde is eloquent in her statement that, far from radical individualism, her new philosophy of life tells her we are all created to be interconnected, compassionate, and focused upon our common humanity. She cites brain research which documents the “we” and the “me” sides of the brain. Hovde shows how the experience of her brain injury has “rewired” her brain (my words) to connect these two sides. These two women and their testimonies have been fascinating and instructive.

A third learning opportunity I have had over the past week has been my experience serving as a juror for a criminal case in Marion County. Since I lived for three days with little else in my brain than this experience, I could easily spend way too long sharing thoughts I have developed about what happens in a courtroom when two versions of one story are told.

For my purposes today, however, I simply mention the strong sense I have developed about how a jury of twelve peers operates. The people with whom I worked and struggled for justice shared a process of intellectual discipline as we weighed testimonies and laws. We shared a process of interpersonal respect and communication as we listened and spoke with one another. We shared a weighty burden of rendering judgment. Others seemed to rest easier with that role of rendering judgment than I did. I was not put on this earth to be a judge. But the group was patient with me and with one another as we worked hard to do our best. I was very grateful for their ideas; their

questions; their eyes, ears, memories and notes about testimonies we heard. I was grateful for their insights and conclusions. I was grateful for their fundamental politeness and kindness. In the end, we rendered a verdict which could be shared by all. I am so glad I didn't have to do it alone. I am so glad for the respect we built among ourselves, so that we could reach a decision together.

Which brings me to the scene at the synagogue of Capernaum, where Jesus “teaches as one with authority” ... and then liberates, or saves, or heals (take your pick on which term to use) at least one man who suffers from an “unclean spirit.” Now, let me explain that an “unclean spirit” in the time of Jesus simply means a spirit or condition which is contrary to health and wholeness and (for some in Jesus' era) is therefore contrary to God's divine purity, and thus not fit to even be inside that synagogue in the first place.

So, please notice that the man in this passage really didn't belong inside the worship space, according to the traditional religious thinking of the day. Second, the same man violated the rules of appropriate behavior when he called out to Jesus (without raising his hand!), “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

I must tell you I have often read this passage and concluded Mark was trying to say it was the unclean spirit which called out those words. But as I read it today, it seems to me the man, himself, is simply calling out from his own solid mind and heart, and demanding that Jesus tell all those assembled just who he is. The man wants to know if Jesus intends to destroy them all. The authority with which Jesus had been teaching in

that synagogue convinced this nameless man that Jesus was the Holy One of God. It makes sense that he would wonder (as most likely many that day wondered) whether the appearance of one who “taught with authority” a new perspective on old religious verities ... well, was this stranger good news or bad news?

Jesus was clearly teaching something different from the scribes. When challenged by the man’s question, Mark reports that Jesus ‘rebuked’ the unclean spirit and called it out of the man. Everyone was amazed when they saw the man undergo some kind of convulsion. Afterwards everyone knew the something profound had happened to him. Again, you can choose your word: was he liberated? or saved? or healed? Whatever it was that happened to that man in worship, everyone recognized the authority of Jesus.

There is another detail that seems important to me. And this detail is what ties the New Testament story about Jesus in the synagogue with the stories of Gabby Giffords, Elizabeth Hovde, and my time dedicated to the jury this past week. It seems important to me that Jesus (first) gave his teaching, (then) received the challenge from a discerning but desperate man, and then (finally) healed/saved/liberated the man IN PUBLIC. It was not a private experience. Its ramifications were personal for the man, but far from simply his own individualistic drama. When he called out to Jesus he used the plural voice, not the singular voice. “What have you to do with US?” he demanded.

And then this man in the synagogue, present there for worship on the Sabbath, somehow was touched so powerfully by the authoritative teaching of Jesus that his own broken place, or illness, or secret sin, or private heartbreak, or festering anxiety about his life or his God ... this man was so powerfully touched by what Jesus said and did that he

called out in public, displayed for everyone to see the most difficult unhealed wound in his life. And then right there in church he was healed. Or set free. Or saved. Take your pick.

But let's remember a key point: before that healing or liberating or saving happened for that man, there was his fear of destruction. He recognized Jesus' authority, and called out the most honest kind of question. Are you here to destroy us? I know who you are now. How afraid should we be? What is your authority going to do, what is it going to feel like, what are you going to demand of us? This dramatic and momentous collision of human self and divine authority, and what this encounter can end up meaning ... this IS what goes on during worship. We may forget how much is at stake and we may forget how ultimate our activity here really is. But our forgetting does not change what is going on.

As I sat there in my jury box this past week, I strained to hear every word, since I knew just how much power over lives I was holding in my hands. The stakes were extraordinarily high. I had been granted authority over a man's future. The responsibility was immense. Well, the stakes here are high, too. The responsibility we hold for one another is also high. Fortunately, our function is not to render judgment. Fortunately, we are all welcome here, even with our secret sadnesses, our lingering regrets, our ongoing struggles which no one knows about.

We are all welcome here and there are no rules to keep us out. We may need occasional reminding, but deep down we all know that we are here not only for ourselves, but also for one another. Each one of us who walks through that door, and all of us who

humble ourselves to open our lives to God in prayer gather as the ones who come fully loaded with the 'spirits' with which we struggle. We all bring with us the hope and prayer that we will be ... what? healed? liberated? saved? Take your pick.

My jury experience of this past week carried with it a secular authority and power as created by our constitution. I didn't remain in the courtroom after the jury rendered our verdict, but I am certain a man is going to jail partly because of my vote. The experience of Gabby Giffords and Elizabeth Hovde are not identical, but they do have a lot in common with each other. Both women have been injured in some permanent ways, through no fault of their own. They have suffered and paid a price few of us can imagine ... although some of us have, indeed, experienced brain injury, and therefore do have a better understanding of what these two women have gone through.

Both women were living active and energetic lives when they were struck down by tragedy ... in one case through violence, in the other case through an accident. Both women have worked their way back to where they are now, NOT by their efforts alone but rather in a way which will leave them always aware just how interconnected they are with others, just how fragile and precious life really is, and just how deeply they seek to integrate their interconnection with the wider human family ... connected in a way which ... what? heals? liberates? saves? Take your pick.

Our place of worship is the right place to remember the authority of what Jesus said and did ... the example he gave, the blessing and healing he bestowed, and the message which he gave his life in order to deliver. Our place and time of worship are the right place to bring our deepest hurts and hidden heartbreaks. This is where we are

supposed to come when we are pretty sure no one else would want us around if they knew the worst thing about us. This is the community which is called to embody compassion and a sense of interconnectedness. This is the community which holds reverence for God. It is a reverence which places us ALL at that vulnerable and needy spot where we accept our own limitations, and where we learn how to care for those who suffer whether near or far, whether visible or hidden.

Elizabeth Hovde points out in her article that many, many soldiers are coming home from war with traumatic brain injuries. Gabby Giffords has to learn how to live with the knowledge that people who came out to hear her speak lost their lives and sustained injuries that will never go away. The twelve of us who pronounced a man guilty of crime will, I suspect, think of him in the years ahead ... even as we think about his victims. And here in our church, every Sunday of the year, we create together a safe container for anyone to bring their deepest need. We turn to one who teaches with authority, and we try to discern his mind for us, together. We turn to the one who gives us what we need ... who heals us? sets us free? saves us? Take your pick.

Let the church say Amen.