By Rhett Engleking

When recruiting people to Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation (JPIC) work, many activists have learned to follow what is called the Iron Rule of Community Organizing, “Never do for others what they can do for themselves.” The Iron Rule is important because there is a powerful temptation for a capable community organizer to hijack a movement for his own ends and there is an equally powerful temptation for members of a community who are inexperienced in demanding their freedom to defer or acquiesce to an outsider in matters of their own liberation. The Rule suggests not only that members of struggling communities have agency (i.e. the capacity to exert power) in determining the course of their own liberation, but also that authority (i.e. the seat of power) in the liberating of a given community ought to rest within members of that community. That the organizer himself can impede the liberation of a community is an important realization for over-zealous organizers who would rob a community of its agency. Yet as long as I have been involved with JPIC work, the biggest impediment that I have observed in Christian communities is the tendency to defer to an outside authority.

There are certainly times when such deference seems prudent, such as acquiescing to the doctrinal authority of a bishop. Teaching with authority is a major theme in the readings for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time and is what I would call “prophetic anxiety.” Prophetic anxiety is that which apprehends Christians from exercising their agency and speaking from authority. It relates to a fear that a faithful person might incorrectly presume to speak in the name of God. Prophetic anxiety is personified in the Gospel as the unclean spirit who fears being destroyed by the holiness of Jesus’ words. It is the major impediment to the agency and authority of struggling Christians. If we trust Moses’ promise that God will raise up prophetic voices from within struggling communities, it is also important to understand how prophetic anxiety becomes the antithesis of what it means to teach with authority.

Listening to the refrain from the Psalmist, “If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts” we are reminded that the voice of God is accessible to all people. If the hearts of the faithful are hardened, the voice of God will only be received by their minds. The mind of a man with prophetic anxiety is like that of a man so overcome by the fear of drowning that he has forgotten how to swim. Instead of floating (or even walking) on the water, the mind frantically flails its arms to grasp at any or every outside source of liberation. In my experience, this tendency to defer to authority seems to distinguish between those determined to grasp what St. Francis of Assisi called “the marrow of the Gospel” and those content with grasping at the straws of the Catechism. Teaching from such a place can be so
devoid of coherence as to be anti-spiritual. Rather than undermine the collective teaching authority of the Catechism, the 95th Psalm reminds us that God is present in the sea of our struggles as well as in the dry land of our comforts. Paul saw this anxiety at work in the Corinthian community as they were distracted and divided by questions regarding marriage, celibacy, and the various ways they fulfill their respective commitments to the world and to the Lord. While each of these concerns do hold considerable importance, Paul was sure to remind the faithful that the anxiety associated with these concerns was robbing the faithful of their spiritual freedom. Just like a drowning man who has forgotten how to swim, Christians lost in the fears of their minds have forgotten the simple importance of abiding in God. They have forgotten because their lives have become overshadowed by encounters with the inevitability of death. While the mind is comforted by a belief that constant indecision constitutes a kind of perpetual life, indecision fills us with anxiety and robs us of agency. In contrast, eternal life comes when the heart rests in the authority of God’s voice.

If we are to overcome prophetic anxiety, reclaim our agency, and speak from a place of authority, it begins with an acknowledgement of our identity. While the unclean spirit could clearly identify Jesus as the “Holy One of God,” our prophetic anxiety extends from the false belief that as members of the Body of Christ, we do not share in that identity. Paul dispels this false belief later in his letter to the Corinthians with a reminder that “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Cor 12:13) If we all share one mystical identity as the “Holy One of God,” confronting our prophetic anxiety would seem as simple as rebuking this false belief just as Jesus did with the scribes in the synagogue. However, our communities (even our scribe-like teaching authorities) have too often reinforced the false belief by pointing to the ways in which we are not as perfect or as capable as Jesus Christ and do not point enough at the ways we share the same identity. In various ways, officials have desired to position the authority of the Church as an institution in opposition to the self-determination of its members. Consequently, members of our Christian community are not willing to speak truth to power because the half-truth they are fed about their identity is that authority is to simply be found outside of themselves and agency runs contrary to humility. True humility, however, acknowledges not only the shortcomings of individuals, but affirms our identity in all of its strengths. Only with such humility can our hearts be soft and our ears attuned to the voice of God that grants authority from within and the agency to command even the unclean spirits in our midst.

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