

January 29, 2012
JESUS AUTHORITY
Mark 1:21-28

Startle us with your truth, O God, and open our hearts and our minds to the word you have for us this morning. In the spirit of the One who still teaches with authority, Jesus our Lord. Amen.

There was once a group of utility workers who were busy putting up telephone poles through a farmer's field. The farmer ordered them off his land, whereupon they showed him a paper giving them the authority to plant poles on his land wherever they pleased. Not long afterward a very large and vicious bull charged the utility workers. As they ran screaming from his field, the farmer sat on a nearby fence and yelled, "Show HIM your papers!"

All of this raises the question of authority, not paper authority but real authority. People were amazed when Jesus spoke with authority and he acted with authority. This happened in a synagogue, the Jewish equivalent of a local church. While there was the great temple in Jerusalem, in each town there was a local synagogue.

While the temple in Jerusalem was the place for pilgrimage and sacrifice the local synagogues service consisted of three things: prayer, the reading of scripture and the teaching or preaching about it. The one official that existed in most synagogues was the ruler or president of the synagogue. He took care of certain administrative functions.

Since most synagogues did not have a permanent teacher or preacher, when they met it was up to the ruler of the synagogue to call on anyone who seemed competent to address the group. It would have been natural for a well-informed stranger like Jesus to be asked to teach. Synagogue rulers would welcome a fresh, promising voice, which explains how Jesus could teach in the synagogue.

But Jesus did not just teach about scripture. He spoke with authority. Many seek to be recognized as an authority in a certain area. The way you get to publish text books, and to get on the lecture circuit, and get on TV talk shows is to come up with some supposedly new thing on which you have been proclaimed, or proclaimed yourself an expert. Someone is forever promoting some new idea that requires you to buy their book. How many

of you remember “new math?” What could possibly be new? The multiplication tables have not changed. We do have a generation of people today who have trouble with basic math because some self-proclaimed authority convinced some school boards to teach “new math” based on their supposed authoritative opinion.

Our culture celebrates the slogan: “Question Authority.” And there are some self-proclaimed authorities we should question. Long ago I stopped paying much attention to anyone claiming to have some new idea no one has even thought of before or some new ground breaking discovery. I kind of like the old ideas like love one another, take it to the Lord in prayer and look both ways before crossing the street.

I have never taken these classes but you can be trained in the art of persuasion to increase your perceived authority. You are taught how to stand and how to dress, what words to use and what pauses are effective, and how to give the sales pitch or the altar call. I believe if the teaching really has authority these things are not so necessary.

Jesus taught in the synagogue. His teachings would have been compared to the scribes. Scribes were scholars who interpreted and taught Jewish scripture – our Old Testament – and rendered binding judgments regarding its application. They tended to rendered judgments based on precedent. They derived their authority from their knowledge of earlier experts on the law.

Over the years, they created a huge body of religious law with which Jesus was often in conflict. The scribes would have been quite sensitive to the fact that Jesus had healed a man on the Sabbath, a technical violation of the Sabbath law as they interpreted it. They believed that only the law in all its ramifications possessed authority. The scribes only possessed authority as it was given to them from the Law of Moses. They taught with the authority of what others said in the past. That is why it was so startling that Jesus taught with his own authority.

We recognize various sources of authority. A king has inherited authority by virtue of being born into a royal line or by force of arms. The president of a corporation exercises management authority which comes from personal wealth or from the board of directors. A professor at a university has achieves of intellectual authority based on title and position and publications. In each case, the source of authority is outside the person who

holds the power to rule a kingdom, to run a business or to teach a class.

Authority is of the same root as the word “author.” An author is the one who originates, produces, and creates. This is not the lecturer who has read all the material and repeats everything that has been written by others. The author is the source. Jesus’ authority came from being one with the Father in creation. In the Gospel of John it says, “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

Jesus’ authority did not result simply from introducing new ideas. If you study the literature of the ancient world, you will find many similar or even parallel thoughts of Jesus expressed by others. The people saw an authority in Jesus that was different from the scribes. The difference in authority was not in degree, but a difference in kind.

When he taught he referred to no authority beyond himself. Jesus interpreted the scriptures as one who had the right to say what the scripture means. Jesus taught in such a way that people who had been separated from God were brought back into fellowship with God. He spoke and his words had authority even over sickness and death.

As Jesus was teaching, a man with an “unclean spirit” came in the picture. It is surprising to find this man in the synagogue, because his unclean spirit rendered him ineligible for synagogue worship. However, the synagogue would probably not have a guard posted at the door, and this man may have trespassed. It is interesting that the person in the synagogue that day who knew more about Jesus than anyone was this disturbed man. This man understood who Jesus is better than Jesus’ own family did. The only other person who seemed to have such a clear understanding of him was the centurion, the soldier who stood guard while he died on the cross.

He cried out, “What have you to do with us...the Holy One of God.” What in the first century was referred to as an unclean spirit was probably what we would talk about as a psychiatric disorder. There is no real clue as to what troubled this man, though evidently he felt deeply conflicted, because he spoke of himself in the plural, as if there were many different passions warring within him. In our language we might say he was dual diagnosis such as someone who is both psychotic and depressed.

It is hard to translate “demon” or “unclean spirit,” into present day language.

Certainly it meant that to be possessed meant that you were being controlled by something other than your own desires. It denotes an invisible spiritual being, neither human nor divine, alienated from and hostile to God, that was deeply troubling this man. Do you know what happens if you don't pay your exorcist? You get re-possessed. Today we do not hear much talk about "demon possession" outside of an occasional spooky movie or TV show.

Yet we are still beset by demons we need out of us and we still need the one who has authority over them. Author Kathleen Norris wrote, "When I think of the demons I need to exorcise, I have to look inward, to my heart and soul. Anger is my best demon, useful whenever I have to go into a Woman Warrior mode, harmful when I use it to gratify myself, either in self-justification, or to deny my fears. My husband, who has a much sweeter nature than I, once told me that my mean streak grieved him, not just because of the pain it caused him but because it was doing me harm.

"Not that my temptation to anger was magically gone, but I was called to pay closer attention to something that badly needed attention, and that was hurting our marriage. In exorcising the demon of anger, that which could kill is converted, transformed into that which can heal."

I don't think Jesus was trying to demonstrate some superior wisdom or extra extraordinary ability as a healer. Rather, personal healing, the casting out of demons, overcoming personal emotional struggles, are signs that in whatever form, God's kingdom was breaking into this world to bring us healing and wholeness and fullness of life.

By whatever name – demons, unclean spirit, emotional illness – the reality is still with us in spiritual, psychological and physical illness. The French physician, Paul Tournier, in his book A Doctor's Casebook, wrote, "Doubtless there are many doctors who in their struggles against disease have had, like me, the feeling that they were confronting, not something passive, but a clever and resourceful enemy."

Whatever the disease, Jesus' healing of the man was a sign to the people that he had the authority over such a demon. By common standards, Jesus did not have the credentials to teach and to heal this man. He came from common folks. His father was a carpenter. Jesus came from a small town. It was not simply what Jesus knew, or what he did, that gave him authority. Jesus said that which was the source of his authority was the fact that "I and

the Father are one.”

There are all kinds of authorities in the world. We speak of “the authorities” meaning police. Some people are considered authorities on certain subjects. The nature of Jesus’ authority is demonstrated in this healing of a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit. This means that whatever in us that is unclean, whatever the thought, whatever the act, Jesus has the authority to forgive and to heal.

The people in the synagogues that day were impressed with the authority with which Jesus spoke. They were impressed as well with the authority he had over the unclean spirit. We do not know what Jesus said, we only know how he said it, that he spoke in a manner that changed lives. We do not know how Jesus healed the man, we only know when he acted it was with such authority that the man was healed. At the end the people at the synagogue were not overwhelmed by Jesus’ great oratory, nor by the miracle cure of the man possessed. They were overwhelmed by Jesus’ authority.

I believe Jesus’ authority was seen in part because he did not fear people with mental illness. Jesus came to accept the rejected, to heal broken hearts, to liberate oppressed people, to renew hope and to show people the way to wholeness. We share in the authority of Christ when we are willing to reach out to people who are overwhelmed by the things of life. The same authority that aggravated the demons, also awakened hope in the one who was helpless.

For those who listened, Jesus taught with authority. The question for us is how much we welcome the authority of Jesus into our lives. Let us pray that when the words of Jesus come to us, when the spirit of Christ touches our lives, we will allow Jesus the same authority in our life that for countless others has given them healing and new life.

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