

With Authority!
Epiphany 4, January 29th, 2012

When I was an intern at a Lutheran church in California before I was ordained, I led a discussion group for an adult class. I don't even remember what the topic was. I do remember passing out material that had quotes from a bunch of different theologians and authors when I wanted to make a point. I would say, Here's what *these* people believe about this Bible passage, or, Here's what *they* think is important. I didn't feel like I had the authority to say, This is what *I* believe. And a member of that church who was on my intern committee said in her evaluation, He'll be a better pastor when he can say what *he* believes.

Maybe for a lot of reasons, I preach and teach with more authority now. It might be because I'm more comfortable in my own skin. It might be because I've studied the Scriptures a lot more since I was 28. It might be because I have more life experience now, and so I've seen God work in ways I couldn't have imagined at age 28. But back then, I wondered if I had authority.

There is a story told of two men who recited the 23rd Psalm. One was a well-known actor, the other an old and rather unsophisticated minister. When the actor recited the 23rd Psalm it was beautiful and commanding in his clear baritone voice, with perfect inflections and pauses. Then the old minister spoke the psalm, stumbling a bit, with his words broken with unnatural punctuations of silence. But when he finished there were tears in the eyes of the listeners. The actor explained, "I know the psalm, but this man knows the shepherd." The old minister spoke with authority.

Remember that Mark earlier in this chapter tells us what Jesus' message is: The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God as come near; repent and believe in the Gospel. And in the next chapters he will show us how the kingdom of God comes in the power that Jesus shows over the spirit world and illness and death and nature.

In today's Gospel, Jesus takes his four new disciples up to Capernaum, which is a town at the top of the Sea of Galilee. He enters the synagogue, where the men of the village went every Friday night to hear the Scriptures and to pray. There was no pastor or priest in the synagogue. Typically a

layman would read a portion of the Hebrew Scripture and then interpret it, like we do in the sermon. In fact, that's where we get our tradition of reading the Scripture and then hearing someone interpret it, from synagogue worship.

So Jesus, being the guest on this day, is asked to read the text and then to preach.

Mark doesn't tell us what he preached on, but he says in v. 22: "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." The scribes were a group of doctors of the law within Judaism. They were the group who put the Hebrew Bible together when they got back from exile in Babylon. They were teachers and interpreters of the law.

Mark says, Jesus taught as one who had authority, not as the scribes. How did the scribes teach? Well, they tended to say, This is what so-and-so says about this law. Their authority came from their knowledge of the tradition, and from the keeping of the tradition, and what other people had to say about it. They were like me as an intern. Here's what other people say. And they tended to hold to very narrow interpretations of the law.

One of those places where we see the differences in Jesus' teaching and the teaching of the scribes is in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel. The scribes were content to give very traditional interpretations of the commandments. And Jesus says, Unless your righteousness is greater than that lived out by the scribes and Pharisees, you'll never enter the kingdom of God. Jesus said, That isn't good enough.

So in the Sermon on the Mount, he breaks open the law this way. He says, You think you've done OK because you haven't murdered anybody. What about those hateful feelings towards somebody you're harboring in your heart? You think those are OK? You think you've done alright because you haven't committed adultery? What about those lustful thoughts in your heart towards your co-worker or your neighbor? Jesus says, That's not OK. Jesus pushes the boundaries of the law, and demands even more.

Now just a side note here. We aren't made righteous by how well we keep the law! The law serves a couple of different functions, but it doesn't make us right with God. Only God can do that for us. The law provides order for society. It keeps chaos in check.

And the laws we have in scripture serve another purpose: They drive us to Christ! We try to obey them, we try to keep them as well as we can, and we fall flat on our face! We realize we can't do what God wants us to do: we don't love our enemies like we ought to, we harbor resentments in our heart, we don't forgive our neighbor; we don't share our possessions like we ought to. And we realize we need a Savior, and it drives us to Christ.

But let's get back to the story. When the people in the synagogue hear Jesus teach, they are astounded at his teaching, and they say he teaches with authority, not as their scribes do! What do they mean? He opened up God's law for them in a way that made sense! It connected with their lives. Jesus' teaching connected people back to God and back into relationship with each other.

Now sometimes it takes a challenging word from Jesus for someone to come back into community. Let's look at the story, continuing with v. 23: "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, "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." (Mark 1:23-24) Remember how this Gospel starts? "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Now this evil spirit is identifying Jesus, the Holy One of God.

There are scholars who look at this story and say, Well, in the first century, people didn't have the kind of advanced mental health knowledge that we do, and so they thought that incidents like this were evil spirits. And these scholars say, We know better now. This was a mentally ill man, who was acting out in the synagogue. Well, maybe. We do know more now about the human mind and various kinds of mental illness.

But I take this story at face value. We don't hear as much about demon possession in this country, but there are Christians around the world who have very personal experiences with unclean spirits. I had an experience several summers ago, and there are people in this room who may have a story to share. My parents prayed for a person with an unclean spirit, and helped bring that person to freedom.

But there are other things that can possess us, right? We may struggle with a spirit of lust, or be possessed by our fears. Jesus wants to free us from whatever is keeping us captive!

Remember that Jesus is going to baptize with the Holy Spirit. And this unclean spirit now is just the opposite. This is a spirit that doesn't want to build up a man; it wants to tear him down. This is a spirit that wants to cause hatred, not love; this is a spirit that wants to keep this man out of the community, away from his family.

And this unclean spirit feels threatened by the Holy Spirit in Jesus, and says, "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." Maybe the spirit thought by identifying who Jesus was, Jesus would leave it alone.

Evil generally wants to be left alone, doesn't it? It doesn't want to be exposed, and if it is exposed, it puts up a fight. If we're doing something that is contrary to God's will in our lives, we want it to stay a secret. We don't want somebody else to know, or they might hold us accountable. And that's what happens when the Word of God shines into our lives. There are things in us that get exposed, and God says to us: What are you going to do about those things? They are hurting you; they're keeping you from all that I want you to be. And Jesus says, I want to set you free from those things, whatever they are, whatever "uncleanness" might be in us: greed, or lust, or addictions, or bitterness, or a spirit of revenge.

But wrong-doing doesn't want to be exposed. It's why there are cover-ups when it happens in government; it's why there are pay-offs in business when somebody is doing something against the law.

So the unclean spirit doesn't want to be exposed. Mark continues: "But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching- with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

And this new teaching with authority is what will get Jesus killed. The religious authorities represent the old way; they want to keep the law very narrowly focused. He was welcoming people into the tent who shouldn't be welcomed: lepers and adulterers and tax collectors. These weren't respectable folks. He was questioning the way they were doing things: throwing people out of the temple who were making money off the poor and

throwing into question the whole sacrificial system. And the religious leaders said, We have to put a stop to this.

But back to the man with the unclean spirit. Did you notice how the unclean spirit refers to itself? It begins in the plural but then moves to singular. What have you to do with us, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us? But then he says, I know who you are, the Holy One of God. When he says, What have you to do with us, it's the demon speaking for both itself and for the man. He asks, Have you come to destroy us? And under the Mosaic Law, the man would have been considered unclean, and would have been thrown out of the synagogue.

But Jesus is able to separate the man from the unclean spirit. Jesus wants to restore this human being back into community. Remember this man wouldn't have been able to live with his family, he wouldn't have been able to be a part of the religious community, a part of the village, he would have been shunned. But Jesus' ministry is all about bringing outsiders into the community.

Our human tendency is to find ways to set up barriers between us and other people: wrong social class, wrong sexual orientation, wrong interpretation of Scripture, wrong politics. Jesus is trying to find ways to draw the net wider. He is about inclusion, about finding ways to bring people into the kingdom of God.

So what helps us speak with authority? I believe it gives us authority when we put food in kids' backpacks in the Backpack Buddies program. I believe it gives us authority when Love INC volunteers help struggling people in our community and our men make bunk beds for foster kids. The words that we share have authority when we back them up with Christ like deeds.

Jesus taught and lived as one with authority. His authority came from passionately living out of the will of the Father, even to giving up his very life. Tom Wright, in his commentary, "Mark for Everyone", tells the story of a tourist ferry that was loaded with cars and people going on vacation. The doors didn't get shut properly, and the boat began to take on water and to sink. Dreams of a happy holiday began to turn into a nightmare.

In the middle of the horror, one of the travelers, who was not a crew member, began to take charge. People could hear his voice, clearly and calmly, giving orders. The panicked travelers began to respond to his voice, realizing that somebody was taking control. Many of them got into lifeboats that they would otherwise not have found in the dark and in their panic.

This man did not get into a lifeboat, but he set off below decks to find other people who were trapped. He formed a kind of human bridge, holding onto the ship with one hand and lowering a ladder with the other. This human bridge made it possible for other people to reach safety. The man did not make it out alive, but he sacrificed his life for others. He assumed authority, he acted upon it, and he saved people.

We're here today because 2000 years ago God's Son spoke with authority to heal, to love, to bring into the community those on the edges. He rescued people who were being destroyed by their nightmares. He was God-in-the-flesh, and he stretched his arms out in death to carry people from death into life.

We are called to be his body in the world, speaking and loving people in this world with authority, the authority we have in our baptism. We are children of God, claimed and loved and sent out to be Christ's body. Amen.