

## “A Question of Authority” Mark 1:21-28

In these weeks between Christmas and Lent, the lectionary gives us *epiphany* texts that have to do with God's revelation to us in Jesus Christ.

In the gospel story we heard today, the people in the Capernaum synagogue are *astounded* at Jesus' teaching, for he taught them as one with *authority*, and not as the *scribes*. Here in the Capernaum synagogue, we're being prepared to consider the *contrast* between Jesus and "the *scribes*."

The scribes were the spiritual descendants of "*Ezra* the scribe," who were *honored* for their function of reading and interpreting the Scriptures. They were the doctors of the *law*, the authorized biblical scholars of their time. They were knowledgeable about the proper observance of the *Sabbath* and the other requirements of the *Torah*, the law of *Moses*. Many of these legal experts belonged to the party of the *Pharisees*.

The scribes tended to be the defenders of the status quo. They occupied themselves with decisions about what was *permitted* and what was *not* permitted by religious law. When the *scribes* taught, they *supported* their rulings by citing *precedents* and earlier *opinions*.

What happens in the Capernaum synagogue develops into the *conflict* that's a major *theme* throughout the *gospel*. In the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark and also Matthew 21, the religious *establishment*-- the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders come to Jesus after he cleanses the Temple, demanding to know: "By what *authority* are you doing these things? Who *gave* you this authority to do them?"

What we have here is a matter of *authority*, in Jesus' time and, I believe, in our *own* time as well.

Competing voices pull us in opposite directions... and appeal to our fears and prejudices. We hear conflicting claims about the facts and the truth. When this happens we ask, "Who shall we follow? How can we know what to *do*?"

The issue of authority was a very important one for the people of Israel. Moses was Israel's first and greatest prophet and the foremost authority on what God wants God's people to do. In recent weeks, we've heard about *other* prophets: John the Baptist announced that the Messiah is coming. Anna rejoiced when Mary and Joseph brought their son Jesus to the temple. Jonah was sent to warn Nineveh.

When Jesus appeared among the people of Israel, they remembered what

Moses said about how to recognize God's true *prophet*. Mark tells us that witnesses are *amazed* at what he says. Jesus' message is new and different. People exclaim, "What's this?! Something *new* is happening here! This man, Jesus, teaches with a holy *authority*."

Even unclean spirits recognize his power. Jesus' words get results. He *speaks* and an evil spirit is cast out. A man who was mentally disturbed is made *whole* again. His illness is healed. His life is reclaimed. His condition had made him an *outcast*. But, now he is cured of this demon, and he can be restored to God and to his community.

Did you *notice*? Mark doesn't really tell us what Jesus *said* in the synagogue. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus himself seems to be the *content* of the teaching. The authority isn't so much in what he *says*, but in how he *lives* as one with *authority*—an authority very different from that of the religious authorities like the scribes.

Throughout the gospel, we see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners; we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath day, silencing the scribes' objection not with an *answer*-- but a *question*: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?" We see Jesus moved by the faith of a Syro-Phoenician woman who dared to argue with him to heal her daughter.

In Jesus' life, we have seen and heard *clues* of how his authority was made known in the *world*. The authority of Jesus moves us toward *inclusion*, rather than exclusion. Jesus reached out to include tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes. He held up little *children* as models of the reign of God... and *foreigners* as models of faith.

As followers of Jesus, we need to be *suspicious* of religious authority that advocates exclusion, or that tries to keep certain people *out*, by rules or daily practice. Jesus' authority values *persons* over rules or traditions. We see and hear this *person*-centered morality at every turn, but most clearly in Jesus' arguments with the religious leaders over the Sabbath laws and other written traditions. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to *save* life-- or to kill?" So as individuals and as the church, we need to value persons over rules.

There has always been a danger that we will try to use the scriptures to confirm what we already *think*... and that we will hear only what we *want* to hear.

Because they already hated Jews, some Germans once found in the Bible justification for *slaughtering* millions of Jews or rationalized their failure to resist evil. Because they wanted to keep their human property, some *American* Christians didn't see a conflict between their faith and buying and selling human beings as if they were animals.

Mean-spirited people usually find a *mean* God in the Bible. Comfortable, *privileged* people usually find that the Bible supports social and political *conservatism*. Poor, exploited people usually find that it supports social and political reform or revolution.

So-- what is to *keep* us from simply *using* the Bible to give authority to our own religious, social, political, and economic *prejudices*? What is to *prevent* us from using the Bible as a pious *excuse* for refusing to face the radical *claims* the living God makes on every area of our *lives*, here and now?

In the Reformed tradition, one of the essential beliefs of our *faith* is a recognition of the human tendency to make *idols* and to *oppress* those who have less *power* than we do. The *positive* part of that belief is our belief that we are called by God to work to transform society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God.

This is a time of great turmoil in Christ's church. During *another* time of turmoil, Martin Luther and John Calvin and other reformers challenged the religious establishment of *their* times and brought about the Protestant *Reformation*. Later, *abolitionists* challenged the status quo in a church that tolerated or actively supported the institution of *slavery*. The traditional view of *women's* role in the church was challenged and eventually women were ordained as elders, deacons, and ministers of the word and sacrament—or as we now say, “teaching elders.”

None of these changes was *comfortable*. Change is *hard*... and *painful*. Sometimes it's hard to discern God's will for us, as individuals or as the church, in the midst of complex, divisive issues. People who advocated for the changes were seen as “fanatical”... “immoral”... “*subversive*.”

The *scribes* we hear about in the gospel weren't bad people. They were trying to interpret God's will to people by spelling out the rules for living faithfully in great detail. They didn't know what to *do* with Jesus when he came proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, telling people to repent-- *change*-- and *trust* in the good news. Whenever he challenged the status quo, they questioned his *authority*.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we confess that Jesus is *Lord* of our life. We're called to *trust* in Jesus. We're invited to continually be *amazed* at the *truth*

and *grace* and *freedom* we find in his teaching... and his *power* to even cast out unclean spirits.

Over the past 2,000+ years, Christians have continually needed to ask in every new time, place, and situation, "What is the living Lord saying and doing, here and *now*? What do we need to say and do in order to be faithful and obedient in our time and place?"

For over 2,000 years, Christians have looked to *Christ--* who proclaimed the reign of God, preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children... healing the sick... and binding up the brokenhearted... eating with outcasts... forgiving sinners... and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Look to Christ, who teaches us that the fundamental expression of God's will is the twofold commandment to **LOVE**: Love God and love your neighbor, who is anyone God puts in your path.

Look to Christ, who responded with compassion to those others **reject** and **condemn**.

One of the reasons the church exists is to speak and act consistently with God's character and purpose—like *Jesus* did. In today's lesson about Jesus and the unclean spirit, Jesus doesn't make compromises with evil. He acts to defeat evil so people can be set *free* for new *life*. He sets them free from what *possesses* them. He heals them of what ails them. Jesus' authority did not come from military force, wealth or social standing. His authority is from *God*, because, like God, Jesus has the ability to deliver and to heal, to convict and to forgive, to cleanse and to raise from the dead.

There's an *urgency* in Mark's gospel to recognize that Jesus has a claim on our lives. We recognize it occasionally in the world. But we see it most powerfully in the worship and sacraments of the community of faith.

Christ calls us to confront and overcome the harmful and destructive forces in our lives and in the world around us. Because we share in the love of Christ, we have the ability to create a caring *community* where the lost and the alienated are welcomed *home*.

Because we are a *praying* community, we share in Christ's ability to focus the creative power of the universe and use it to restore people to health and wholeness.

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<sup>1</sup> Brief Statement of Faith (1991) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

As the people of God, we are called to share the good news of God's love and to help the world recognize the miracle of *grace* that is offered to all people in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit, the giver and renewer of life, justifies us by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers,<sup>2</sup> whether we *agree* with one another or not, in the one body of Christ, the church.

Thanks be to God!  
Amen!

Rev. Fran Hayes  
Littlefield Presbyterian Church  
Dearborn, MI 48126  
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<sup>2</sup> Brief Statement of Faith (1991) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)