

“With Authority”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 1, 2009

4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 1:21-28

We hear about the breakdown in authority in almost every phase of American life: from the home to the halls of politics, from classrooms to the role of the church. Young people do not respect it. Leaders do not inspire it. People holding the offices that used to be trusted without question now seem not to deserve it.

What has happened to authority? We take this question all the way back to Capernaum, back to today's reading from the gospel of Mark, which one translation reads: "...immediately, on the Sabbath Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." Why did people sense authority in Jesus' presence? How did they recognize his authority and what was so compelling about it? What is this teaching that so astonished Jesus' hearers?

We can't say for certain. For, not a single word of Jesus' teaching on that Sabbath day in Capernaum is remembered here. Whatever it was that so astonished people was not written down for us to hear. It is rather odd that in Mark's gospel, where Jesus is called "Teacher" over and over again – by disciples, by the crowds and by the Pharisees – very few of Jesus' teachings are remembered. In Mark, there is no Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew. Nor will you find many of Luke's parables here. And we will never know what Jesus taught here in Capernaum – we only know how he taught: "as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."

That, too, is rather odd. For authority seems to be precisely what the scribes had! They could claim the authority of written words passed down through many generations. They had the authority of tradition which dated back to the time of Moses. They had the prestige of religious leadership, the authority of clerical position and power. But somehow Jesus' teaching was more compelling, more authentic to those who heard him. What sort of authority was this?

Suddenly, the scene is interrupted by a mad man. Right in the middle of the synagogue we hear a wild voice: disruptive, disjointed, sounding crazy. Where were the ushers? Who let this man in? "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" His shouting drowns out the preacher. "Have you come to destroy us?" Us? We look around. There is only one man shouting. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God."¹

¹ Barbara Lundblad, "A New Kind of Authority"

The man is possessed by a demon: an unclean or, literally, “impure” spirit. In biblical language, “impure” means simply that it is contrary to the sacred. Jesus doesn’t name the illness of the man oppressed by this spirit, but he calls it out. The emphasis remains on what Jesus, the teacher, does rather than what he says. This evil spirit, despite its loud shouting and convulsing, turns out to be no match for the Holy Spirit which has descended upon Jesus.

What sort of authority was this? In Mark's gospel, Jesus’ authority rests not in the words of any particular speeches, but in this one particular life. Jesus lived as one who had authority, an authority which proved to be radically different from that of tradition. Different from what had come to be expected. And so, when people witnessed it, they were amazed; they talked about it. Many questioned Jesus and tried to trip him up with questions about the tradition or the written word, but Jesus taught through his actions; the people came to know him by watching him.

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus gathering unlikely followers and eating with tax collectors and sinners. We see Jesus healing on the Sabbath day, silencing the objection of the scribes 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 hear Jesus admit the limits of his own knowledge. When Jesus spoke about the end of time, he said: "Of that day or of that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only God."

Jesus taught as one who had authority. And yet, it is a radically different kind of authority which should prompt us to re-examine what authority means for us, and to look carefully at how authority functions, especially within the church. Jesus did not give us a guidebook on authority. But, in his life, we can see and hear clues of how his authority was made known in the world. The people in Capernaum were amazed, so that they questioned among themselves: "What is this? A new teaching!" When we hear and see this new teaching, we too will be moved – if not toward clear answers then at least in new directions.

First, the authority of Jesus favors inclusion rather than exclusion. More specifically, this authority includes the very persons who had been excluded before. Those invited to be a part of Jesus' following included tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes. Jesus pointed to little children and foreigners as models of faith. Therefore, we ought always to be suspicious of religious authority – official or unwritten – which moves toward exclusion, whose aim is to keep certain people out.

Second, Jesus' authority values persons over rules or traditions. We see and hear this person-centered morality at every turn. At one point, Jesus said to the religious leaders, "You are making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on." Does Jesus turn to us with the same accusation? In our longing for greater certainty and clearer religious authority, it is often the most vulnerable persons who suffer. How has the good news been damaged because our churches have operated from a “members only” frame of mind? We must learn to judge ourselves and our churches by Jesus' insistence in valuing persons more than laws.

And finally, we must judge ourselves and our churches by Jesus' acknowledgment of human limitation. We long for absolutes, but Jesus' authority was marked by admitting there were some things even he did not know, that only God knows.

We long for things to be clearer and feel threatened when there seem to be two or more possible right answers. We would rather check "true" or "false". But Jesus stands with us in the midst of our uncertainty, promising to be present with us as we struggle for faithful answers in this time of human history. If we can acknowledge that our human understanding is not the same as God's, we may come to believe that the Spirit which dwelt with Jesus will lead us into truth which has yet to be revealed.

There is a temptation to assume that this story is about someone else in another time, rather than recognizing ourselves in it. The story takes place in Capernaum in Galilee – a local parish – not in Jerusalem. The scribes are the ones who bring, in the assembly of the faithful, teachings based on their holy texts and traditions. The man afflicted with the impure spirit was able to enter their midst undetected, until faced with the power of Jesus' authority.²

Maybe it is a good thing that this illness is left unnamed, because it could have been so many different things. In most church gatherings, there would literally be a legion of these unclean spirits present among the participants with – I would guess – the majority unrecognized. Various addictions and afflictions, the scars of separations and loss, anxiety and depression, fear over lost jobs and faded identities. In the face of Jesus' unique authority, many of the afflictions might be heard crying, "what have you to do with us?" as we so often think the only cure rests with the doctor, or with the counselor, or in working harder or in making ourselves forget.

But, in looking and seeing what Jesus did – what he taught – the people of Capernaum were amazed. In their midst, in their congregation, the affliction was detected and the illness resolved. Not just one person, but the whole people were shown healing through this teaching.

As you prepare to sit at the Lord's table this morning, let us keep in mind why Jesus is for us the one "with authority;" because through him, we are moved to include rather than exclude, to value persons over rules or traditions, and to recognize that some questions, for us, will remain unanswered. Only God knows, but the good news is that God knows. AMEN.

² Mike Graves in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 1