

Sunday, January 28, 2018
NT Mark 1:21-28
Sermon: “A Spirit of Authority”
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²¹ They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴ 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.” ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ 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.” ²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. *This is the Word of the Lord*

“I could plant flowers in the dirt under those fingernails”

“You weren’t born in a barn. Close the door!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.”

“As long as you live under this roof, you’ll abide by our rules.”

“If your friends jumped off of a cliff, does that mean that you would too?”

“If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

“Nothing good happens after midnight. Be home by 11:30.”

How many of you recognize at least one of these sayings as something you remember one or both of your parents using with you at sometime during your childhood or adolescence? And how many of you have found yourself since then using some of the same sayings?

These classic exhortations get passed from one generation to the next. They are outward attempts to exert parental authority – the authority of parent over child. And what more frustratingly authoritative statement than, “because I’m your Father, that’s why!”

Such statements reflect how overwhelmed we sometimes *feel* with this *thing* called “authority.”

Authority – what is it? Webster’s Dictionary defines authority in three basic ways:

1. The right, power, and at times, even the responsibility either to command and be obeyed or to do a particular thing.
2. The power of certain kinds of knowledge.
3. *Someone* whose knowledge and opinions command respect and belief.

Not only our text this morning, but the whole first chapter of Mark is about this definition of authority. In fact, I would not have been surprised if upon turning to the word “authority” in the dictionary, it would have said “for best example, see Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1.”

Mark intentionally presents a sequence of events in the opening days of Jesus’ ministry that, above all, establishes his authority.

First, John the Baptist defers to Jesus as one who is to be more powerful than he.

Then this power becomes a reality in the life of Jesus when the authoritative Spirit of God rests upon him at his baptism with a voice from heaven stating “YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED” (1:11).

This Spirit of authority in Jesus then manifests its power over Satan in the 40 day wilderness test. (1:12-14).

And now, in today’s lesson the authority of his Word is demonstrated in his teaching and in his unusual abilities as an exorcist. The narrative of verses 21-28 focuses explicitly on this authority: “and 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.*”

The Greek word *ex-e-place-onto* is the word translated here as “they were astonished.” But it means literally “they were having the breath knocked out of them.”

In classical Greek it is the same verb used to express what happens when someone gets a sword thrust into them in battle. *Exeplaceonto*. And so there is great emphasis placed by Mark on the sheer wonder of Jesus’ authority – an authority not invoking fear or guilt but a deep sense of awe and astonishment at its amazing grace.

Part of the Good News of Mark, in fact, is that this Jesus is the one who is in touch with *The* true Spirit of authority:

a Spirit of authority so compelling that it convinces people to leave their occupations and their families to follow him;

a Spirit of authority so refreshing that it transcends the teachings of all other religious leaders;

a Spirit of authority so connected to God that it can defeat demonic forces;

a Spirit of authority so exhilarating that it can even overcome illness and disease.

In short, this authority of Jesus is so astounding that he has become the talk of the whole territory.

Indeed, *this* Spirit of authority is altogether different from the kind we normally think about. It goes far beyond the definition I found in Webster’s.

Unlike many kinds of authoritative powers that we experience in our lives, this *spiritual* authority of Jesus is never an end in itself but is always in the service of the love of God. This is an authority that is not so much coercive as irresistible; not so much prescriptive as evocative,

bringing the best out of those it touches.

The main purpose of the authority of Jesus is neither to scare one into submission nor to seduce one with visions of personal grandiosity. It is instead an authority that compassionately invites one into a loving relationship with one's maker. Its mission is not to gain power over, but to give one the courage to align one's whole life with *Christ's* power

– a power not of this world.

A power that gives a kind of present clarity to one's life, allowing one to *be*, without judgement, and therefore allowing one to act in ways one could not without it

– and all without any brow-beating, guilt-tripping, or manipulation; but instead through an invitation to healing, wholeness, and grace.

It takes courage to accept the kind of authority Jesus offers because unlike acquiescence to most other authorities of this world, acceptance of the authority of Jesus makes one more responsible not less.

It is an invitation by the Spirit to hold one's ground in mindful compassion rather than with a gun in one's hand;

It is an invitation to judge actions without judging the people who commit them.

This is the Spirit of authority that was available to Jesus, and the Good News that I share with you this morning is that this same Authority is now available to you through the raw unbridled Spirit of God.

And make no mistake about it – it is a Spirit that is as challenging as it is inviting – a Spirit that can and often does knock the breath right out of you like a sword being thrust in your gut. To be confronted with *this* Spirit of Authority, is at once to be humbled and put in your place while at the same time, to be encouraged and invited to stand strong and be who you are called to be.

The best example I can think of here is Judith Light.

Judith is a sixty something mother and grandmother who now lives alone on a rented farm overlooking the Pacific ocean in the state of Washington. She stands about 4 feet 11 inches tall and weighs maybe a hundred pounds soaking wet. She is a native of New Zealand having lived here in the US for most of her adult life.

I met Judith at a Hakomi workshop I attended last year in Bellingham. Hakomi is a form of psychotherapy, but it is much more than that. It is a community of people for whom loving presence, non-violence, mindfulness, unity, and mind-body wholeness are not only a therapeutic mode, and not just lofty principles, but an integrated way of life. In a word, it is a way of living and working that taps into the same Spirit of authority that belonged to Jesus.

Part of what happens at the Hakomi workshops is some in-depth heart to heart sharing based on what comes up from one's temple – the residence of the Spirit, as it were – one's body. It soon became apparent that Judith's body, not unlike the man of in our scripture text, carried

terrorizing tremors that belied a most recent trauma. It seems that one night last fall, as she was about to go to sleep, alone in her house, a 17 year old boy from a neighboring area, threw himself through her bedroom window.

He came crashing through screaming out of his mind about the end of the world. Within minutes, three other teen boys, two of whom she knew came as well, apologizing profusely for their friend. Apparently, with parents out of town, the boys had decided to take LSD together and the boy who had thrown himself through her window was having a bad trip.

The police and the boy's parents were called. But here is where the story takes a most unusual turn. Judith filed no charges. Instead, she negotiated with the parents and the police, as a condition of not filing any charges that the boys meet regularly with her to do chores with her around her house.

When asked about her reasoning, Judith says that the boy who came through her window says that he cannot remember any of the events that transpired that night. Therefore, she says, any punishment he would receive would be meaningless. It is impossible to take responsibility for something you can't or won't remember. And, Judith says, it would also be all too easy for the others to conclude that their mistake was not in using the poor judgement it took to take the LSD in the first place, but in not doing more to ensure that they didn't get caught.

So, Judith says, the only way these boys will ever make more loving compassionate decisions where others are concerned is if they get to know their traumatized victim as a person and come to terms with what their actions really did to her.

And get this: Judith believes that nothing happens by accident. Those boys came literally crashing into her life because there was something those boys needed that only she could give *and* there was something they could give her that could only come in this way – namely a developing of her inner authority around compassion.

St. Paul spoke in quite similar words to the Corinthians when he wrote in his second epistle:

“If you are confident that you belong to Christ (and not to yourselves) remind yourself of this: that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we. Now even if I boast a little too much of this authority, . . . I will not be ashamed of it. (II Corinthians 10:7-8)”

Like Judith and the Apostle Paul, we need to claim this same authority for our lives:

- an authority that belongs to God but that God shares with all of God's children who are in relationship to the loving Spirit of the Christ
- an authority that is bold, but not boastful
- an authority that demands respect but is also compassionate...

Richard John Neuhaus is a rather prolific writer on a wide range of church related topics. In one of his books, *Freedom for Ministry*, he writes about the hunger of people today for religious authority.

He says:

“Because they cannot take the risk of having any doubt and yet cannot find enough security in their own churches, many people gravitate toward those who equate authority with authoritarianism and doctrine with dogmatism. These are the people who in their hunger are prey to the dogmatists. Of these authoritarians they say, ‘at least *they know* what *they believe*.’ Jesus impressed people because he spoke with authority, but Jesus was not authoritarian. He engaged people in reflection, inquiry, and self-examination leading to repentance and new life.”

“Authoritarianism, like dogmatism does not call for engagement but for enslavement; it invites not the birth of thought but the end of thought; it does not provoke pilgrimage but encourages the laying down of our burdens in a false and premature sense of ‘having arrived.’

In the end it makes one feel he or she *is* god-like. And particularly if one’s existence is marked by oppression, joblessness, fear, mediocrity, failure, meaninglessness, or some combination thereof, how could such a one resist – so that once one is infected, the following of a madman, the slaughter of innocents and suicide attacks are just a step away?

On the other hand, genuine divine authority, the kind that was in Jesus and to which Jesus calls his disciples comes only from the burdensome, often difficult truth that is authentically and innately our own.”

Such authority is at once the cross we bear as disciples and the narrow way to resurrection life. “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden,” he says. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

I wonder how many of us come today burdened – burdened by an avalanche of responsibilities, burdened by a failing government and the suffering that we are more aware of every day. In response, we either can’t find a healthy locus of authority from which to make good decisions and so do nothing, or, frightened at our own impotence, we give in to the temptation to become authoritarian and dogmatic.

Christ invites us to a third way. This is the way of surrender to the knowledge that the spirit of Christ is with us and will guide us. We tend to forget this or else we are not really sure we trust it. I’d like for you to trust it and before you go, I’d like for you to taste it by participating in a little exercise...

I’d like for you to close your eyes. Now use your imagination to picture Christ standing right up here next to me. He has his arm around my shoulder and I don’t know how you could have missed it before because he has been there the whole time that I have been speaking. Just standing there, smiling. But now he is looking into your heart. He sees what is there. He has compassion for you as you continue to struggle with what you have been struggling with for some time now. So here he comes right to where you sit. He’s making his way to you. He is now standing right behind you. He now puts his hands right down on your shoulders. And now it just feels like he is lifting a tremendous burden from you. He is sucking the worry and the stress right out of your body. So just relax and enjoy this moment of peace. For Christ is with you from this moment, even to the end of the age. If there is anything that you would like to say

to him and to get off of your chest do so silently now. (Pause) The Spirit of Authority; it has been there with you all along. Let us pray.

Gracious God, we thank you that your authority is not like that of the scribes and Pharisees and especially not like those who use bullying, lies, manipulation, guns and violence but is a way that leads to abundant life. Give us the faith to trust that loving authority in whatever we face and to whatever you may call us. And now bless these gifts that may benefit your kingdom. We pray this in the name of Christ, Amen.