

WE HAVE IT ON GOOD AUTHORITY

Mark 1:21-28

Former NJ Senator, Bill Bradley, a fellow Presbyterian, tells of a time he was attending a political dinner in Washington. When the waiter came around, Bradley said, “I like two pats of butter.”

“Sorry, Sir,” the waiter responded, “It’s one pat to a customer.”

“Well,” replied Bradley, “I guess you don’t know who I am. I’m a senior member of the U.S. Senate.”

The waiter shrugged his shoulders and retorted, “Well I guess you don’t know who I am. I am the guy with the butter.”

Confrontations often grow out of questions of authority. Who’s got it? Why do they have it? How did they get it? Should they keep it? How should they use it?

My doctoral research project and dissertation was on pastoral authority. I’d observed that there were certain pastors who seemed to carry authority in the presbytery and in their congregations. Consequently, they had effective ministries. And, there were others with little or no authority, either in the presbytery or in their congregations, and they were ineffective pastors. Since every pastor begins with a given amount of authority invested in the position, I wondered why some used it well and grew it, while others floundered. So, I conducted extensive interviews of pastors and elders in their congregations. And, I researched the theological basis of pastoral authority. I discovered that the source of pastoral authority flows from Jesus Christ, through the apostles to the New Testament to the church to the pastor via ordination. The appropriate use of

pastoral authority is to build Christian community and organize mission outreach. I learned that a pastor's authority is enhanced when 1) the pastor's character is perceived to be high; 2) the pastor's commitment to and relationship with Christ is perceived to be deep; and 3) the pastor's personality is perceived as loving. In a nutshell, the more the pastor is perceived by his/her parishioners to be Christlike, the more authority he/she has.

In today's text the issue is Jesus' authority. The congregation listens to his teaching and exclaims in wonder at his authority. In Mark's gospel we find several more accounts showing why Jesus was able to say to Pilate, while on trial, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (Mt. 28.18).

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus goes to Capernaum and teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath. The congregation marvels at his teaching. It is significantly different from what they usually hear from their regular teachers, the scribes. What happens next sounds strange to us. As Jesus is teaching, he is confronted by a man described as having "*an unclean spirit.*" We don't know exactly what that means, but his behavior suggests a mental illness.

This story reminds me of what happened when my friend, Jerry Iamurri, visited Princeton Seminary. He attended a chapel service. In the middle of worship a man in the pew in front of him began to shout and carry on. Jerry was shocked and scared; he feared the man had a gun or knife. He didn't know what to do. Just then a man on the other side of the sanctuary got up from his seat, came over, and sat down next to the disturbed man and

put his arm around him. It calmed the fellow and the service continued. It was a worship experience Jerry will never forget – not only because of the commotion, but also because of a seminarian’s Christlike intervention that calmed a disturbed man.

In the disruption of the service in the Capernaum synagogue, the disturbed man shouts, of all things, *“What have we to do with you, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”* Recognizing that this fellow is terribly troubled by demonic influences, Jesus heals him. The congregation is now amazed by Jesus’ action as well as his teaching. They exclaim, *“What is this? A new teaching and with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits and they obey him.”* **In relating this story, Mark is telling us that Jesus embodies the truth of God and he exercises the prerogatives of God.** The letter to the Colossians says it like this: *“(Jesus) is the image of the invisible God.”* (Col 1.18).

In another account in Mark, a paralytic man is carried to Jesus by his friends. Jesus tells him to take heart, his sins are forgiven. Some Pharisees overhear this and mumble that Jesus has no authority to forgive sins. So Jesus asks them, *“Is it easier to say, ‘Rise and walk’ or ‘Your sins are forgiven’? So you know I have such authority to forgive sins, I’ll heal this man.”* Then Jesus commands the man to take up his bed and walk, and he does. (Mk. 9.2-8)

In yet another account in Mark, Jesus is in a boat with disciples sailing across the Sea of Galilee. He is tired and falls asleep on a cushion in the stern. A gale-force wind

arises, kicking up high waves, which threaten to sink the boat. The disciples are terrified and awaken Jesus, begging his help. He rebukes the wind and waves and says to the sea, *“Be still.”* The wind dies down, the sea calms, and the disciples whisper to themselves, *“Who is this that even the wind and waves obey him?”* (Mk. 4.35-41) For Mark their question is rhetorical. The answer is obvious. This is a man who carries the very authority of God.

What made Jesus authoritative and the scribes less so?

He embodied the truth. During Holy Week, he was hauled on charges before Pilate, who said to him, *“So, you are a king?”*

Jesus answered, *“For this reason I was born and for this reason I came into the world, to bear witness to the truth”* (Jn. 18.37-38a).

The truth of which Jesus speaks is true knowledge of God’s character and God’s will and way for the world. It was his mission to witness to the truth of God. He could do so because of the deep and intimate relationship he shared with God. He declared that he came from God, and when he spoke he testified to what he’d seen and heard. Unlike the scribes, whose authority was based on their knowledge of the law, Jesus authority emanated from his relationship with the Father. This relationship enabled him to say, *“I and the Father are one.”* and *“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”*

Jesus’ authority rests on his ability to reveal the nature of God in his person, in his words and deeds, his character and personality. The scribes were religious authorities, but they did not display the intimacy with God that he did. Their lives lacked his spiritual power. Their vision lacked his clarity, comprehensiveness, and certainty.

The truth Jesus proclaimed grew from his own soul. Consequently, Jesus was able to speak and act with the very authority of God.

So, where does this put us? What are we to do with this revelation? It puts us in the position of accepting the authority of Jesus over our lives. When someone joins a Presbyterian Church they are asked questions like these: “Is Jesus your Lord and Savior? Do you trust in him? Will you be his faithful disciple?” To declare Jesus as your Lord means he has the right to tell you how to live and you have the responsibility to bow to his authority.

It puts us in the same position of an army colonel I read about. Late in life he decided it was time to become serious about the faith into which he’d been baptized as a baby. It turned his life upside down. Several years later, he told his story to a group of army medical personnel. He said his return to Christian faith had changed him. Over time, he was becoming temperate, whereas he had been intemperate. His colleagues said he was much more considerate of others, whereas before he’d been severe. His family noted his new compassion in place of his former self-centeredness. A psychiatrist in the group, who believed personalities are firmly set early in life, questioned that he could have such a change. “Well,” answered the colonel, “you may be right, but at least I can say this: I am under new management. I now answer to another authority.”

Our text is asking us to understand that, if we are Christians, we are under the management of Jesus. We answer to his authority. What does this mean? In general terms it means we will endeavor to love God to best of our ability with all we have and are, and we will seek to love

neighbors as ourselves, especially the poorest of our neighbors. It means we will do unto others as we would have them do unto us. We will follow Jesus' teaching, which I am boiling down to what we call "The Great Commandment" and "The Golden Rule."

In more specific terms it means we will love God by praying regularly, seeking God's will for our lives as much as asking for God's blessings, and by regular worship to praise and honor God in a community faith.

A quote from *A Diary of Private Prayer* by Dr. John Baillie serves as a good example of the mindset called for. He prays:

Let me stand today –

For whatever is true and just and good;

For the advancement of science and education, and true learning;

For the redemption of daily business from the blight of unfair advantage;

For the rights of the weak and oppressed;

For industrial cooperation and mutual help;

For the conservation of the rich traditions of the past;

And for the recognition of the new workings of the Spirit in this time;

Today, O Lord –

Let me put what is right before my self-interest;

Let me put others before myself;

Let me put the attainment of noble goals above the enjoyment of present pleasures;

Let me put principle above status;

Let me put you before all else.

A few years ago it was common to see folks wearing a plastic bracelet with the initials WWJD embossed on it.

It sprang from an old book, *In His Steps* by Charles Sheldon, that was a collection of sermons about fictional characters in the fictional town of Raymond very much like the town in which this congregation lived. The pastor, Rev. Henry Maxwell challenged the congregation to live by the question: What would Jesus do if he were faced with my life situation? They were then to follow that path regardless of the social, economic, or personal cost to them. In other words they were to intentionally live under the authority of Jesus. We are too.

On a personal level for us this means that as we ponder how we earn a living, invest our money, cast our votes, spend our free time, and share our talents, we do so with the question in mind of what Jesus would do in our place as a directive.

On a communal level it means we consider issues like homelessness, systems of education, fire and police protection, drug abuse, fair representation, building codes and crime with the same question in mind.

On the nation level it means we consider issues like DACA, health care, tax policy, national security, the environment, poverty, education, criminal justice, racial problems, and distribution of wealth once again with same question in mind. What would Jesus have us think and do about such issues?

At each level we remember that were Jesus were in our shoes, he would endeavor to listen carefully and understand fully the opinions and position of others as we make our choices. We'd be quick to listen and slow to speak. We'd do it all asking ourselves how we'd want things

to work if we were in a powerless minority, what Jesus called “*the least of these.*” We’d seek unity and justice at every level. Admittedly, many of the personal, communal, and national issues of our day are murky, and responses come in shades of gray. It can be difficult to determine exactly what Jesus would do or want us to do. Even so, his authority requires us to try.

This story of the disturbed man in the Capernaum synagogue from Mark sounds strange to our ears. We don’t think in terms of “unclean spirits.” We think in categories of mental health. However, if we dwell on that, we miss the more important point. The good news of this passage is that Jesus, “*the Holy One of God,*” as the man called him, comes to us with the authority of God. He embodies the truth of God. By healing this man, Jesus tells us and shows that God intends for all of us to live together in health with justice and happiness for all.

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