

“Not Power, but AUTHORITY!”

We are still only at the 21st verse in the gospel of Mark,
but so far, the author has crammed an amazing amount of information into his account.
He has claimed that this story is the fulfillment of scripture, introduced John the Baptist,
described Jesus’ baptism, mentioned his being tempted in the wilderness,
and told us that after John had been arrested and thrown in prison,
Jesus called Andrew, Peter, James, and John to follow him.
Today we find out that the 5 of them go to Capernaum,
and on the Sabbath, he entered the synagogue and began to teach.
And the people *“were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority,
and not as the scribes”*.

Now you will remember that we have 4 gospels, 4 authors’ accounts of the story of Jesus,
and each one tells the story in a different way, emphasizing different things,
describing the essence of who Jesus from different perspectives.
John begins his story of Jesus’ ministry with the story of a miracle –
Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana.
Matthew and Luke both begin like Mark with Jesus teaching –
in Matthew it’s the sermon on the mount, and in Luke it’s him teaching in the synagogue,
but those gospels are concerned with the content of Jesus’ teaching – whereas Mark is not.
It’s almost like Mark is saying, “the content isn’t the important part”.
In the gospel of Mark what makes Jesus’ teaching authoritative is his person;
his teaching is authoritative because of who he is — he is “the Holy One of God.”
So all Mark has to say about Jesus teaching
is that the people were astounded because of the authority with which he spoke.
And then Mark goes on to show how Jesus used that authority – to cast out an unclean spirit.
In Mark there’s no difference between what Jesus says and what he does –
both his teaching and his healing emanate from this “authority”.

Now, in today’s world, we often use the words “power” and “authority” interchangeably.
But I want to make a distinction between the two.
In the religious world at the time of Jesus, the scribes, along with Pharisees & the Sadducees, had the “power”.
They were part of the “cultural power structure” of the day.
Their “power” was given to them by virtue of their role and position.
However, even though they had “power”,
they did not necessarily have the support of the people, so they lacked “authority”.

Dictators, for example, may be powerful because they have an army behind them,
but they lack genuine “authority” in the hearts and minds of the people.
The Apartheid government may have had the power in South Africa for many years,
but a jailed man named Nelson Mandela had the authority.
It’s a similar situation for the scribes.
The scribes are often presented in the gospels as oppressors of the people
who were so focused on the details of the law that they missed the larger purpose.
In other words, they were not teaching what God desired,
and yet they were still powerful because of their position in the society.

Genuine “authority”, however, comes not from one’s position in the society but from God, as one does what God has called them to do.

Good teachers, for example, have authority, their teaching is authoritative, because of their God-given gifts and because God has called them to be teachers.

Good teachers are teachers for the right reasons.

They teach not for the money (what money?), not for the prestige (what prestige?); they teach because they’re called, because it’s who they are, and because it’s what gives meaning and purpose to their lives.

And it’s those God-given, God-blessed aspects of their person that gives their teaching authority.

So, to have “power” does not necessarily mean one has “authority”.

Just because someone has “authority” does not necessarily mean they have power.

Jesus had the authority, but in the end it was the scribes & Pharisees that had the power to call for his crucifixion.

“Authority,” in the best sense of the word, is persuasive, it doesn’t need nor does it depend on threats of force.

People gravitate toward genuine authority because it is persuasive and speaks to the heart; it’s recognized as being different/special and as having come from above.

So, Jesus is different from the scribes, because Jesus is said to teach with “authority”.

Jesus’ authority comes from above.

He is rightly identified by the demon as, “the Holy One of God”.

Jesus’ authority is a derived authority, coming directly from God.

And it’s this divine authority that we see unfold in the gospel of Mark.

It’s this divine authority that is constantly being critiqued by those in power because they feel threatened by it; it is this divine authority that is constantly being challenged because they fear losing their power.

And they’re right to feel threatened and afraid

because it is Jesus’ divine authority that ultimately trumps all worldly powers.

We’re given a clue about just how all-encompassing Jesus’ divine authority is when he heals the demon possessed man.

Now we could get all hung up on the question of how to understand demon possession in the Bible.

Talk of spirits and demons seems primitive and makes us uncomfortable today.

However, I don’t think there’s any argument that evil is still a problem.

In fact, sometimes evil is so great, that there is no other way to explain it than from this spiritual perspective.

As the famous preacher and teacher, Craddock said,

“No service is rendered simply by announcing that we no longer believe in demons... [for] not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world.”

So this exorcism is simply an example of Jesus’ overcoming evil in the world.

And this is what astounds the people: Jesus has the authority to overcome evil.

Which is still astounding today if you think about it.

What other authority is there that can overcome evil, eradicate it, make it go away?

We put people in prison but that doesn’t make evil go away.

Or, how many of us struggle with the presence of evil in our own lives?

Do we have the power or authority on our own to just make evil go away?

Isn’t the Apostle Paul’s self-reflective question our daily question:

“I do not understand my own actions.

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15)

There’s an old Native American story about a chief instructing some braves about the struggle within.

“It is like two wolves fighting inside of us”, the chief told them.

“There is a good wolf who wants to do right and a bad wolf who wants to do wrong.

Sometimes the good wolf seems stronger and seems to be winning;

but sometimes the bad wolf seems stronger and seems to be winning”.

“Who is going to win in the end?” a young brave asks.

“The one you feed”, the chief answers.

The only food available to feed the good wolf within us comes from above, from God.

It comes in the form of Bible study and prayer and praise and worship.

It does not come in the form of good works.

For if we attempt to live a life of good works,

without grounding what we are doing in prayer and Bible study,

we will be operating out of our own power, and not out of God's authority.

We do not have the power to overcome evil on our own.

In fact, left to our own devices we will choose evil more often than good.

And here's the thing:

people can recognize whether we are operating out of our own power
or out of God's authority.

If we are operating out of the God's authority, people will recognize it

because they will see the gifts of the Spirit evident in our lives,

like faithfulness, and kindness, and gentleness, and generosity,

like peace, and patience, and love, and joy.

But if we try operating out of our own power,

we will end up acting in ways that are unkind and mean and stingy

in ways that do not demonstrate faith, in ways that cause division instead of unity,

and in ways that are not filled with love or joy.

Jesus spoke and acted with authority

because everything he said and did was directed by God.

Jesus' authority certainly did not win every battle with power –

which was why he ended up being betrayed and abandoned and denied,

and suffering and dying and being buried.

But while his authority did not win the battle, it won the ultimate victory,
when God raised him from the dead.

The same is true in our lives.

When we listen to God and submit to God, and obey God,

we will be speaking and acting with God's authority –

and that is exactly what triggers attacks by the powers of evil.

Speaking out for truth and working for justice may indeed cost us,

and it may seem like the powers of evil are winning.

But when we are living under God's authority, we can trust in the ultimate victory.

Jesus taught with authority that day; and Jesus teaches with authority today as well.

That's pretty astounding.

But what is even more astounding is that

that authority allowed Jesus to cast out evil back then

and that authority allows Jesus to cast out evil today as well.

Jesus, the "Holy One of God", is here today, teaching with authority,

and it is this Jesus who has the authority to call evil out of us,

to forgive us, and to transform us.

It's here that we are fed on the scriptures read, proclaimed, and taught.

It's here that we are nourished by the sacraments.

And it's as we leave this place, listening to God, submitting to God, and obeying God

that the Spirit of Jesus gives us the authority to speak love and cast out evil.

May we live in such a way that people can see in us the authority that comes

from being enabled by God, enlightened by Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit. Amen