



Sermon Title: ***“By What Authority?”***

Scripture: Mark 1:21-28

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The writer of Mark’s Gospel wants us to understand that what set Jesus apart from all the other teachers, preachers, healers, prophets and miracle workers of his day, was the authority with which Jesus did everything. And there was no shortage of authority figures in Roman-occupied Palestine.

Aside from the authority of Rome itself, there was the corrupt, regional, puppet-government of Herod, the various religious authorities (the Scribes, the Chief Priests, and the Pharisees, each contending to exert the greater influence over the temple and its people), the John-the-Baptist types (the traveling preachers, itinerant healers and baptizers), the street-corner magicians, and even the monastic sects in the desert.

Each claimed unique authority and tried to convince everyone that they and they alone spoke for God. It was a religious climate not completely unlike the one swirling around us today. Now, as in Jesus’ day, it’s very difficult to discern who represents God with authority.

Yet, we are expected to live and act from the divine authority God confers upon each one of us. God’s authority rests with each believer, not with a chosen few. God wants all of us to speak and act from the authority that is ours through Christ.

Pastors often frame their ordination certificates and hang them on the walls of their study. When we are ordained as United Methodist clergy, our Bishop uses a particular phrase that tends to remain with all of us. The Bishop’s hands are placed on our head, our name is spoken aloud, and the Bishop says, “Take authority as an elder in the Church to preach the Word of God, and to administer the Holy Sacraments.”

“Take authority . . .” But while the authority to preach and administer the sacraments within the church can only be conferred by the church, the authority that brings every pastor to that moment comes from much further back. It’s the authority of the Holy Spirit that called us into the pews in the first place. It’s the authority of God’s own hands, God’s own voice, that all ultimately claim.

It’s the same authority that called you into the pews. It’s the same authority that calls to you now. It’s the authority of the living God and it expects the very same things of you that it expects of me. I mostly work here, and you mostly work out there, but we are all called to exactly the same work, the work of the kingdom of God.

The man with the unclean spirit spoke for all of us when, confronted by the power and authority of Jesus, he asked, "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."

What has he to do with us? Everything! Has he come to destroy us, yes, in a way he has. He has come to destroy everything in us that is not of God and to build up everything in us that loves God and others. He grants all of us the authority to know God, to love God, and to speak and act for God in the world. Yes, we do know who he is. We know that he is the Holy One of God who seeks to live in and through us.

Every day other voices try to usurp Christ's authority over our hearts. All the time these other voices work to convince us that they are in control, that they are the smart choice, that they are the successful way, the team way, the company way, the American way.

But we know that the only voice that offers the loving way, the caring way, the way of grace, the path of peace, the act of mercy is God's. We all know deep down that only one voice ever speaks of redemption, new life, resurrection, and compassion. We know it's the only voice in the universe with authority over demons and all the evil that misguided people can do. We know it's the only voice that will ever call us to the good thing, the humble thing, the self-denying thing, the self-sacrificing thing, the loving thing.

THE authority of our lives cannot be conferred by ordination, or graduation, or certification. THE authority of our lives is conferred only by the Holy Spirit.

We are God's people. Our baptismal vows and our membership vows mean something. Authority has been conferred upon us. It is within us. It is us.

Every day, all the time, at work, at play, as citizens of this nation, as employees, as members of a family, as people alive on the earth, we are beset by voices urging us to do all kinds of things, anything and everything EXCEPT live for God as Christ's people.

It's hard to say "no" to those voices and "yes" to Christ. It's often hard to tell one voice from another, especially in times of struggle, and in situations when our decision could isolate us and confound the plans and hopes we have for ourselves and those around us. That's because saying "no" to other voices of authority, and saying "yes" to God, makes us like Christ. We share in his suffering, and in his glory.

Sometimes, the hardest thing we can do is to say "yes" to God, and thus discover strength sufficient to say "no" to the other powerful authorities around us. But when we do, we become our finest, truest selves. When we do, we become the Christians we always hoped we would be. When we do, we discover something within us that we didn't know was there.

We discover that we are speaking with the authority of God. We discover that we are citizens of a graceful kingdom whose power and glory blesses and keep us when no other power, and no other kingdom, can. We discover something in us that is beyond us, more than us, better than us, and yet truly and completely us.

Everybody speaks the language of the myriad competing authorities of the world. They are the first words that come to our tongues, because they are the words that relentlessly assault our ears, our minds, and seek possession of our souls. These are the easy words, and they are also, far too often, the hurtful words, the selfish words, the wrong words; the words of meanness, ego, greed, envy, anger and all the rest.

The words of God's authority are usually not the first words, but they are the best words that will ever come to us. They are worth waiting for. They are worth holding our tongues for until they arrive. They are the only words that will make things better. And when they come to us, they come with conviction, with a certainty that is not of this world, and with confident authority that comes only from God.

God wants and needs us to live from the divine authority God confers upon each of us. God's authority rests with each of us, not with a chosen few. God wants each of us to speak and act from the authority that is ours through Christ.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, take authority as baptized believers to spread the Word of God, and to live a sacramental life in the midst of the world.