

“With Authority!”

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20 / Mark 1: 21-28

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The Gospel of Mark begins with a series of introductory accounts that essentially, set the table for the accounts of Jesus’ ministry. There is the proclamation of John the Baptist announcing the coming of Jesus. There is the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan that is followed by the reference to Jesus’ being driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness. Then, when John is arrested by Herod, Mark announces the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and the calling of Jesus’ disciples.

With the table thus set, Mark then proceeds to provide the “play by play” of Jesus’ actual ministry. Our lesson from Mark, this morning, represents the first account of that ministry—the healing of the man with an unclean spirit. There are, of course, many ways of approaching this story and just as many ways of dissecting it and analyzing it for the meaning that it holds for us.

For my purposes this morning, I would like to focus my attention not so much on the actual exorcism of the unclean spirit, but upon the impact that this incident made upon those in the synagogue at Capernaum who witnessed it.

Notice, if you will that there are two moments of astonishment and surprise that take place in the short span of eight verses. The first moment comes in response to the teaching of Jesus in the synagogue. Mark informs the reader that the people were, **“astounded at this teaching for he taught them as one having authority—not as the scribes.”** (Mark 1: 22)

At this point in the narrative, Mark tells us that a man with an unclean spirit challenges Jesus in front of the gathered assembly: “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.”

Jesus, however, was not intimidated, but instead, confronts this tormented man by calling out the “unclean spirit” residing within. “Be silent and come out of him!” he commands. Then, as Mark describes it, the unclean spirit convulsed the man and cried out with a loud voice before leaving the man.

And it is precisely here that we see the second moment of astonishment and surprise on the part of those who watched this drama unfold. **They were all amazed and kept asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even he unclean spirits and they obey him.”** Mark then concludes this passage by suggesting that **“At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.”**

The reader should take note that in this, the first story of Jesus' actual ministry, he is making a definitive statement about the nature of this ministry. It is a ministry that commands astonishment and amazement over the authority with which Jesus operates. And please don't miss the fact that Mark is underscoring the fact that this authority is unlike anything that the people have witnessed in those who were the recognized religious authorities—the scribes.

Right from the “get go,” Mark is announcing that Jesus has an authority that is unlike anything that anyone has seen or experienced. It is, for all intents and purposes, an epiphany of the power of God at work in the life of this man. What we will see, of course, in the pages that follow, is the ongoing struggle that Jesus's encounters with those who are so threatened by his authority that they determine to take his life.

That, however, is a focus for another day. This morning, I would like to linger a bit with you over the question of authority—of what it is, of what it looks like and where it comes from.

The renowned sociologist, Max Weber, has suggested that there are three fundamental types of authority.

- 1) There is **RATIONAL-LEGAL AUTHORITY**. This form of authority is rooted in the laws of the state and the power of the state to punish those who disobey those laws.
- 2) There also, **TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY** which is derived from the customs, habits and social structures that govern our day to day lives.
- 3) The third form of Authority, says Weber is known as **CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY**. Here the charisma of the individual—the gift of grace received from a higher power—is the source of authority. This authority, rooted in the inspiration that comes from God, is often viewed as taking precedence over other forms of authority. The most obvious example would be the authority that was embedded in the witness of Martin Luther King and his refusal to surrender to the authority of laws and practices that were unjust.

When we consider the witness of Jesus, we are clearly looking at one whose authority was rooted in the extraordinary charismatic gift that he possessed, the gift of knowing and understanding the mind of God. By virtue not only of his wisdom and understanding, but also of his courage and faithfulness to act upon that understanding, Jesus was one who absolutely astonished the people of his time with an authority that they had never experienced before.

To be sure, they knew all about the Legal Authority of the Romans who imposed their will by force and the threat of force. They understood that if they didn't respect Roman authority, their lives and the lives of their family members would be placed in jeopardy.

They also knew about the Traditional Authority that was wielded by their Religious Leaders and their insistence on following the letter of the law, often at the expense of the common people themselves. They understood that if they failed to follow these traditions,

they would be shunned and excluded as those “unclean” and therefore, unworthy of the company of those who were “clean.

Yes, the people of Jesus time knew all about these expressions of authority and the rules that they imposed. But what they had never encountered before was someone who taught and acted with the authority that Jesus demonstrated. It was an authority that amazed and astonished them. Today, we might say that it was an authority that absolutely blew their minds! What is this? A new teaching—with authority!

Think, for a moment, about the threat that Jesus’s authority posed—not only to the religious establishment, but also, to the political establishment of Rome. Without question, Rome represented the greatest power in the world at that time. Yet, let me ask you, who actually held the greater authority? Was it Caesar or was it Jesus?

If you read between the lines, you will find that the Gospel of Mark is essentially grounded in the conviction that there is only one authority on heaven and earth and that it does not belong to Rome. In fact, some scholars actually see a parallel in Mark between the unclean spirits who inhabit certain individuals and the unclean Roman spirits who inhabit and torment the nation of Israel. That, once again, is for another discussion.

I trust that my point is obvious. Jesus possessed an authority that neither Rome nor the Religious Establishment could come close to possessing. The reason? It was a Charismatic authority that was grounded in God and rooted in the conviction that the love of God represents the ultimate authority in life.

What were the characteristics of this God given, God inspired, and God empowered authority?

- 1) **It was not something that Jesus sought for himself.** It was not something that he tried to earn or acquire for his own benefit. I believe that Jesus’ sense of authority was something that evolved within him as he became clear about what God was calling him to do with his life.
- 2) **Jesus’ authority, I believe, grew within him as he gained a deeper understanding of the nature of his calling and the ultimate power of God’s love.** Once God’s dream for humanity became his own dream, he found the courage and the conviction to speak and act with an authority that was truly astonishing.
- 3) **Finally, Jesus authority was not only grounded in God and God’s vision for humanity, but it was prompted and provoked by the injustice, self-centeredness and greed that he witnessed in his day to day life.** The violent arrogance of Rome and the smug self-righteousness of the religious leaders that he encountered provoked Jesus to exercise his authority by challenging these systems of oppression. When all was said and done, it was human suffering and human need that inspired Jesus to speak and act with an authority that was truly astonishing.

We live, of course, in a world where there are those who seek to possess authority at all costs. They operate under the assumption of Caesar that the one with the most money, or political clout, or privilege or power wins. And they may well spend the better part of their lives seeking to grasp such authority and to then use it for their own benefit.

Yet, true authority—the authority that comes not through threat or force or intimidation, but through compassion, mercy and love—is an authority that they will never possess, no matter how hard they try.

One of those individuals who has fully grasped the true meaning and importance of authority is Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

Here is a man small of stature, but large of heart, a man who faced the unbelievable pain and oppression of the Apartheid system in South Africa and yet, refused to be denied or diminished by it. He faced the worst that South Africa's white government had to offer and cheerfully replied that he would have none of it. He was relentless in his hope, tireless in his optimism and dauntless in his courageous opposition.

He had none of the tools of power or prominence or privilege and yet, he spoke and acted with a confidence and an authority that even his staunchest opponents found to be rather astonishing. In his presence, FW De Klerk the President of South Africa and his arch opponent, was absolutely no match—in spite of the fact that he held all of the trappings of authority.

In his clear and unapologetic insistence upon justice, Tutu exercised a moral authority that would, in time, turn the tide against this repressive regime and bring liberation to those whom it had enslaved. He once observed, **“I am not interested in picking up crumbs of compassion thrown from the table of someone who considers himself my master. I want the full menu of rights.”** And that is, of course, what he and his people would eventually receive.

Yet, in spite of the amazing victory that was earned, Bishop Tutu did not call for retribution, but instead, for reconciliation. In chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, his goal was to heal the wounds of hatred and prejudice through the practice of confession, forgiveness and grace. His courageous witness in this regard has left an indelible mark not only on the people of South Africa, but many people around the world. Truly, Bishop Desmond Tutu has modeled for us all the self-less, God inspired, other centered witness of authority that dwarfs feeble attempts to claim authority through power, privilege or force. Here is an example of authority that is truly astonishing!

As impressive as his witness is, I am also aware that there is a danger in focusing only upon Bishop Tutu's witness. The danger is that we may conclude that this kind of authority belongs only to those who are specially called or specially gifted to answer the challenge that confronts them. That is simply not true.

The truth is that each one of us has, within us, a God given authority—an authority that we can exercise whenever we choose to stand up for justice, whenever we choose to oppose hatred and racism, whenever we choose to think and act on behalf of others in the name of

the God who loves us, the God who, even now, is busy at work reconciling us with one another and with God.

The authority that Jesus claimed is the authority Jesus gives to all who share in his vision of the world as God intends for it to be. It was **George Bernard Shaw** who once observed that “the reasonable person adapts to the world, while the unreasonable person persists in trying to adapt the world to themselves.

Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to be “unreasonable” people who simply refuse to adapt to the ways of this world that insists on self-centeredness, exclusivism and greed. May you find it within ourselves to summon the courage and the conviction needed to lay claim to our God given authority—that is, the authority to work for a world that is a true reflection of God’s dream for us all. **Amen!**