

## A Question of Authority

Mark 1:21-28; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

When we think of authority, what comes to mind? I think for most of us, we think of someone with power, with influence over others or events...And how do “authority figures” get that power and influence? Certainly, people with a particular knowledge or training and experience gain authority by the assets, the resources they present in certain situations. Judges, doctors, and scientists are some of those who came to my mind...Yet others hold authority based on their title, their position, or the role they fill in various settings, for example politicians, nobility, law enforcement, and management in all its various forms. Now ideally, these people with position would also have the knowledge and experience to exercise that authority - but we all know that certainly is not always the case, is it?

What about Jesus? What kind of authority does he represent? In our passage from Mark this morning, Jesus speaks “with authority” and a lot is made of how the people responded to his teaching. We're told they were “amazed”, with the contrast, the difference between the teachings of Jesus and the teaching of the scribes...

So, what made Jesus' teaching so different? The teachings or the lessons from the scribes and the Pharisees the people were accustomed to were well-established. They followed the age-old pattern of Torah scholarship, where they examined one passage and compared it with other passages where the same vocabulary was used; then referenced commentary of other scholars on that same passage. It's a type of study called exegesis, still commonly used today, in both Jewish and Christian study. It can be very informative about exactly what the vocabulary in a particular passage really means in the original text, and how it fits with the original context in which it was written. However, what exegesis doesn't reveal is how to apply that meaning to our everyday behavior and how we are to live our lives. Certainly, some texts are pretty cut and dry; for example, “treat others the way you would like to be treated” – that’s pretty well understood. But many are not so clear in their meaning and their application.

This is where the “authority” with which Christ taught is different. His background as a Jewish man certainly included study of the Torah and taking his turn reading scripture at his local synagogue in Nazareth. He may have even had the opportunity for some rabbinical training in those lost years we know so little about. So, I'm sure he had a foundation in the more traditional exegesis method of teaching. But what made him different is his knowledge and revelation of the kingdom of God...of God's intention with a particular scripture.

Jesus is the physical manifestation of God's kingdom breaking through into this world. He speaks from that perspective and gives his audience clear answers for exactly what God's intention and meaning is in the scriptures he presents. Jesus tells them how to apply it to their real lives, instead of presenting an ideal, law-filled existence that they can never achieve.

But it's not just in his teaching that his authority is demonstrated. We also have the casting out of the “unclean spirit” in this story as well. In our current age of scientific discovery and fact, “demon possession” is a troublesome aspect of some of the biblical stories because for some, it can be a stumbling block to studying the scriptures. But “perspective” can play a big role in how we approach such stories. Remember, these stories were written down in a largely pre-scientific era, where the concept of “possession” would have been accepted as normal...that such supernatural occurrences were a valid explanation. Now, I am in no way saying that such things are not possible. But what's important here is the bigger struggle being portrayed in this story. Whatever was afflicting this man was of this world, it was a force that is in opposition to God and God's kingdom...Jesus demonstrated that God is the superior power, the ultimate authority in this world as well as the kingdom that drew near.

What are the forces today that rob us of the fullness of life that God intends? What influences of the world pull us away from God's intentions for our lives? We have many

“demons” we struggle with in today’s world. Our headlines are full of stories of addictions of all kinds: drugs, greed and consumerism, pride and nationalism, sex, power, the list goes on and on. Like the unclean spirit in our story of long ago, our demons, today, are unique to us. They feed on our own weaknesses, our own submission to temptation in all its forms, which often manifest themselves in anger, violence, and despair. Yet we, unlike the man in today’s story, have four gospels full of Jesus’ teaching with authority. We have access to many of the lessons he taught, insight into what the kingdom he represented is all about.

The question is, how do we use that knowledge? Do we make the effort to let the beatitudes and lessons of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7 guide our lives? Do we take seriously the call in Matthew 25 to care for the least of these?...Do we pride ourselves on our material success, or in our servanthood of all - as Christ teaches in Matthew 20. If we are called to be servants to each other - that greatness is in our service to others - how should we handle those among us who struggle with the “demons” of our time?

Paul, in today’s lesson from 1 Corinthians gives some insight into that very question. In Corinth, there were many members who were from the educated, sophisticated upper classes who worshiped alongside those of lesser means and lesser education, who belonged to the working classes of that society.

Those schooled in Greek philosophy from the upper crust often had an easier time discerning the finer points and nuances of Christ’s teachings as related by Paul, so they were better able to apply those lessons to their daily lives than those who did not have the benefit, the privilege of such an education.

Today’s lesson focused on the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols. Paul knew that the elite in the group grasped that idol gods don’t exist, and therefore meat sacrificed to

them is not tainted in God's eyes. God is certainly not a fan of the actual idol worship, but that meat is meat, and to waste that resource would be sinful. However, some among the working class couldn't get past the point that they still felt they were slipping back to their past lives of idol worship by consuming such meat. Paul's point to those who understood his teaching on this matter was that even if they had a deeper understanding of a theological concept, if their practice of that understanding caused stress or tension for a fellow church member, it was better to abstain than to make them feel tempted and sinful. Paul tells us that those among us who struggle are members of our family, and that our focus should be on serving them by helping to strengthen their faith, not by letting them struggle unnecessarily.

How do we see that in the church today? Are there those who struggle with how others live out their faith? What about those who struggle with their own demons, because they lack self-worth and forgiveness, and can't see the free grace that God offers all of us? Paul would tell us that it is our duty to seek out those very people who struggle, and not to hold our own faith and understanding over them, to "puff ourselves up", but to be humble, to show compassion and understanding to those who not only struggle with their own demons, but struggle with our "other's" expression and understanding of their faith. Paul rightly understood that this discord and lack of understanding can tear faith communities apart...As many of you know, this very congregation suffered a painful rift because of different understandings of faith and scripture and what it means to practice that faith.

Our own denomination, the Church of the Brethren, is currently experiencing such a rift over biblical interpretation. The question is, by what authority do we operate in our own faith lives? Are we holier than thou and let our weaker sisters and brothers struggle? Or are we willing to make our own sacrifices, to show forbearance with one another for the

common good? Do we speak from a compassionate, caring kingdom perspective as Christ, or from a loftier place of pride?

I'd like to close today with a story about giant sequoia trees. The giant sequoias of California have very shallow root systems...their roots extend just barely below the surface. It sounds impossible because we all know trees need deep roots to withstand drought and wind, but sequoias are most unique. They only grow in groves where their roots intertwine and their limbs interconnect with each other. When strong winds blow, they hold each other up. This is the way the church is designed. Without the help of others to keep roots firmly planted, with no support from others, the individual Christian will soon fall. Like sequoias, the Church will grow tall when we stand together and support each other. Will we grow together and thrive, or will we pull apart and collapse? Will we speak with the authority of God's kingdom revealed through Christ, or will we take pride in our own perspective over that of others? What choices will you make? Amen.