

Epiphany 4B 2018, January 28, 2018, Mark 1:21-28, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Our gospel reading this morning directs us to consider the subject of authority. Jesus comes on the scene teaching publicly in the synagogue. Immediately the people listening to him perceive that this fellow teaches with authority. So today, we want to think about authority. What is it? And what does it mean for Jesus to possess authority? And lastly, what does Jesus' authority mean for us?

But first, let me say something briefly about our text. Notice our passage comes from the first chapter of Mark's gospel. Jesus shows up in public as an adult. There is no birth story like there is in Matthew or Luke. He is somewhat mysterious. No one knows anything about him. Up to this point in Mark's story Jesus has been baptized in Jordan River and he has called a few fishermen to come after him. Mark wants us to encounter Jesus without any prior knowledge or pre-conceived ideas. Who is he? What does he want? What are you going to do after you hear about him? These are Mark's questions to his readers. They are questions to us as well. What are you going to do, as you hear these stories about this man? So, Mark begins his story of Jesus with this first trip into the synagogue to teach. This teaching story is the very first real public appearance of Jesus. Right from the very start Mark wants us to see how the crowds react to Jesus. He wants to put us right there in the midst of these stories.

The people listening to Jesus perceive he teaches with authority. After he exorcises an unclean spirit from a man they again proclaim Jesus' authority. So what is it, this authority? Most of us have some idea about authority. To varying degrees or another we possess authority. We live with authority. We live under authority.

The simplest kind of authority is that which establishes and enforces rules by which we live. Parents give guidance to their children. "Don't speak with your mouth full of food. Clean your room. Always say 'please' and 'thank you.'" Every other enforcement of rules in our lives is derived from parental authority. From paying your taxes to obeying traffic laws to following the instructions of your employer, these are all authorities we must listen to. As I said, this is the simplest kind of authority because it's something we all live with every day. Mostly this authority is outside ourselves. It's authority that's imposed on us from the outside, from someone else.

This leads me to speak about another authority, an authority that we perceive inside ourselves. Simply put, the authority inside ourselves is the ability to make choices. "Am I going to have eggs or cereal for breakfast this morning?" You have the authority to make that choice. The whole history of humanity, at least in modern times, has been the attempt to maximize the areas in which human beings have authority over the own lives. Choosing what you'll have for breakfast is minimal. But choosing where you'll live, who you will marry, what kind of profession you'll have, what religion you adhere to; these are big questions over which wars have been fought, people enslaved and then struggled to be freed. How much authority each of us possesses over our own lives is usually at the heart of every modern controversy and fuels all our political debates.

So far we've considered external authority as enforcing rules or standards from outside and internal authority, the ability to make choices. There is at least another kind of authority. Let's say you've just finished reading a book; it doesn't really matter what kind of book. It could be a work of fiction, or a book about some period of history, or a book on philosophy or science or art. Then, you read in the paper the author of the book is coming to town and she's going to

give a talk about the book. Afterwards, there will be some time for questions and answers and conversation. You go to the talk and listen to the author. Hearing the author makes the book come alive and that much more real. You go back and actually re-read the book and the words take on new meaning. They jump off the page with a new vibrancy and relevancy.

Do you see the connection between the two words: “authority” and “author?” The author of the book is the best authority there is for the book. That’s the one you want to go and hear. If you have a choice between listening to the author of the book or someone else who has studied the book and teaches about it you’ll want to listen to the one who wrote it.

That’s the kind of authority people saw in Jesus. He goes into the synagogue and teaches. Which means he’s teaching from the Bible, which is what happens in synagogues and in churches, by the way. And when he teaches from the Bible the people perceive it’s as though he is the author of the Bible and not one of the official interpreters which is what the scribes are. When they sit at his feet listening to him they can say, “he wrote the book.” The author of the words make the words come alive. They have power and purpose and meaning. This is why Mark tells us of Jesus casting out an unclean spirit right there in the synagogue while he’s teaching. These aren’t mere words on a page; but living words, powerful words, teaching that possesses power on its own. Notice what the people say after Jesus casts out the unclean spirit. “What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” So right at the very beginning of his gospel Mark wants us to see that Jesus’ authority is one of authorship, not just interpretation. When people are in Jesus’ presence they are in the presence of the source.

So far we’ve considered the nature of authority, both external and personally internal; and we’ve seen that Jesus’ authority is one of authorship. And this leads me to my third question, what does Jesus’ authority mean for us? Is Jesus another external authority we need to obey, like our parents or a policeman or our boss? Does he come with another set of rules which we are required to follow?

Simply put, Jesus is not just another external authority. Rather, Jesus is the new internal authority in our lives guiding the choices we make in life. That’s really the point behind all the Bible’s talk about dying with Christ and rising to new life, or being joined to Christ in faith, or the Holy Spirit living within you, or praying “create in me a new heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” The life of the Christian is life with Jesus at the center of our lives.

Think of it this way. Your life is a story. A wonderful, complex story full of twists and turns, even ups and downs, profound joy and even great sadness. There are characters and supporting characters, surprises and conflicts. And there is an author to your story. An author who walks with you all along the way. An author who is the authority about your own life, and the life of every single person who ever existed.

And here’s the greatest part of it all. The plot of your story will reach its climax, its dramatic conclusion, with the revealing of who that author is. You already know, because you’ve been let in on the secret, the mystery that is hidden but shall be revealed. Amen.