

## AS ONE HAVING AUTHORITY

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Grace Church in New York  
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 28, 2018

*They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22)*

Years ago at the first parish I served, one of the youth confirmation classes I taught consisted of about twelve 8<sup>th</sup> graders. As the day of the bishop's visit drew near, we began to focus on the central question that he would ask them: "*Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?*" The correct answer, being supplied in the Prayer Book (p. 415), is: "*I do, and with God's grace I will follow him as my savior and Lord.*" What would it mean? How would it really play out in their young lives to follow Jesus as their savior and Lord? To press the matter, I decided to assign an essay that would require them to think about the question. Truthfully, while I was hoping for more depth than, "I don't know," I wasn't expecting any theological masterpieces. But as for one student, I was astounded by his essay, for he wrote as one having authority, and not as the other students.

In his essay the student told a story about himself. The year before, as a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, all was going well until one night while lying in bed waiting to go to sleep, he thought he'd received a premonition that his mother was going to die the next day. At first he dismissed the thought, then realized that bad things happen to good people all the time, and his family was no exception. He was too embarrassed to tell anyone about his fear, so after a sleepless night, he went through the next day in complete dread of what might happen. He arrived home from school to find his mother alive and well, and heaved a great sigh of relief. The problem was, the thought didn't go away. It persisted. It possessed him. He trudged through the next days in fear and foreboding.

Eventually, the anxiety became too much for him to bear alone, so one evening he finally confessed to his parents that he just knew something awful was going to happen. He didn't want to alarm his mother so he kept the details vague. His parents took the time and heard him out. They encouraged him with words from Romans 8: that God was for him, not against him; that nothing in all creation could separate him from the love of God; that he would be more than a conqueror of these fears because God loved him. Over the next week the boy leaned heavily on his parents words. At length he realized he had to decide which master to serve: Jesus or his phantom fears. He chose Jesus, and it doing so, over time he discovered that the Spirit of Christ really did dwell in him, and strengthened him to endure all things. He concluded his essay, "That's what it means for me to follow Jesus as my savior and Lord."

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, we hear how Jesus was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. All was going well until a man with "an unclean spirit" cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" The truth is, we really don't know what Mark meant when he described the man as having an unclean spirit. Was he mentally ill? Was he possessed by a demon? Was he under the curse of some pagan deity or sorcerer? Or was he simply a fragile soul who believed in spooks? Whatever the cause, the man had lost all restraint and ability to engage the world appropriately. So Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit and ordered it out of the man, leaving him well. The people were astounded by Jesus, not only by his healing of the man, but by *his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

Mark takes pains to contrast the teaching of Jesus with the scribes. When the scribes taught they would cite the law. For any and all circumstances of life they would appeal to the ever-growing code of conduct based on the Law of Moses. Thus, their teachings would all seem to be answers already printed in the book. What the scribes said might be correct, but it would be second-hand, pre-packaged. When Jesus spoke, he taught with a personal conviction that appealed to no authority other than his own. He spoke as if his authority were direct from God, not derived from the Law. He embodied the Law and the Prophets. It was immediate. It was real.

I think of a story I once heard about a little girl whose father was a soldier in World War Two. Every night the girl and her mother would kneel at her bed and pray for their beloved's safe return home. Nearby the bed was a small, framed picture of the man that they would hold as they prayed. Many evenings when they said "Amen" to their prayers, the girl would kiss the framed photo and say, "good-night, Daddy." Then, one wonderful day the man came home, whole and well. That night the three of them knelt at the girl's bed and prayed in thanksgiving. When they were finished, the girl's mother said to her, "Now you may kiss Daddy good-night." What did the girl do? She took down the photo and kissed it! Old habits die hard, I suppose. In that moment, the girl reached for the image rather than the real thing. In the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus brought to the people the real thing: the immediate gift of God's presence and power. He taught and he healed with authority. It was as if he stepped out of the picture the scribes had been presenting. The people were astounded because they'd grown used to an image once or twice removed.

This gift of Christ's presence and even power isn't merely bound to distant years in Palestine. It can be ours today. But how? How can we experience the authority and power of Jesus? Well, like the young student in my confirmation class, you and I face a daily choice. Which master will we serve? Our own unbridled appetites and instincts? Our phantom fears and deeply ingrained habits? The opinions and expectations of others? Or will it be Jesus? If you are leaning towards Jesus, ask yourself: does he live? When you kneel at your bed to pray, by the power of his Spirit, is he there with you? If you dare to say yes, if you risk being astounded, if you reach for his real presence and not a second-hand teaching, then you can trust that this close companion of your inmost thoughts and ways is not your imaginary friend. It is not excess static produced by the firing of your neural network. No, this is the Spirit of the living God, given to us in baptism, and refreshed in us through the Eucharist. Whatever transformation God wants to work in you may not happen as suddenly as it did to the man in the synagogue, but know this: it will begin. Be patient with yourself, because God is patient with you.

Here is something else to know. Even though you and I are works in progress, the presence of Jesus is not merely a gift for us to experience alone. No, the authority and power of Jesus are also ours to exercise, to practice in our lives, and to share with others. If you read in Mark just two chapters beyond where we are today you will see that Jesus sent his disciples into the world with authority to cast out demons. In the Gospel of John the promise to those who believe in Jesus is that they will receive power to become children of God. I won't bore you with New Testament Greek, only to say that power and authority are translated from exactly the same word. Imagine, the power and authority of Jesus are ours. The Spirit and the gifts are ours. Really? On the one hand, many of us feel inadequate the task of wielding the power and authority of Jesus. On the other hand, much of society cringes when Christians start talking about stepping out in power and authority. What do we mean – the power to control and coerce? The authority to decree and demand? No, what we mean is the power of love. What Jesus demonstrated in the synagogue was the authority of love.

In today's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians (8:1-13), St. Paul wrote: *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* Paul was addressing a specific controversy in the Corinthian congregation that

shows us what it means to apply the authority of love. The Corinthian congregation included new and mature Christians. Corinth was a religiously plural society. Most of the meat for sale in the market places had been sacrificed in the various temples to the various gods and goddesses. The question was, should the Christians partake of such meat? Those new to the faith said absolutely not: this meat was defiled. Some sinister spirit hiding in a sirloin steak might sneak into your soul, and then you'd be back to the starting blocks with the demon possessed man in the Capernaum synagogue. "Look what happened to him," they might have said. "He probably ate defiled meat!" You see, old habits die hard. Even though the new Christians had begun their life in Christ, they were not entirely free from their fears and superstitions associated with whatever cult they belonged to before. But the mature Christians knew that they had nothing to fear. Meat offered to pagan gods was harmless, they said, because the pagan gods had no existence, despite how fervently people believed in them. With such knowledge they bought in the market place and ate at table, even in the presence of the new Christians, with no worries about the origin of the meat.

Apparently, the question was roiling the Corinthian church, so Paul wrote them a letter, a portion of which we heard today. Even though Paul was in theological agreement with the mature Christians, he gave them a pastoral directive. He advised them to refrain from eating meat offered to idols. Yes, they were correct in their knowledge that the meat was harmless in and of itself. They were free to eat it. *But take care*, wrote Paul, *that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.* Not to bore you with any more New Testament Greek, but the word Paul used for liberty is once again the same word Mark used for authority, and the same word John used for power. Liberty. Authority. Power. Paul was concerned that the mature Christians were using what they understood to be their gift from Jesus not to build up the weak, but merely to puff up their own egos. It's as if they suffered from a fairly common spiritual malady we might call "amnesia of the already saved." They forgot that they too were once new Christians in need of patience and understanding. Yet, as they helped themselves to another lamb chop sacrificed to the goddess Athena that very morning, "there but for the grace of God go I," they might have said, looking condescendingly upon the new Christians still working through their fears. Paul implied that the mature Christians were being needlessly insensitive and rude. *Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up*, he wrote. Use your liberty, your power, your authority to build people up, not tear them down.

I think again of the 8<sup>th</sup> grader in my confirmation class and the amazing essay he wrote, now more than 25 years ago. Here was a young person gripped by fear and anxiety – even possessed by them – who decided to trust that Jesus would lead him through death's dark vale of shadows. His transformation was not like that of the man in the synagogue. It was more like the new Christians in Corinth, who slowly emerged into the full light of day. It was a daily walk through high school, but one that grew more mature with each passing year. I've long since lost touch with him and his family, but the last I heard he was in graduate school studying child psychology, with the goal of being a therapist. Today I imagine that he's been in practice for some time now, and my guess is that he is a blessing to his clients, using his authority in love to build them up and lead them into light.

How about you? *Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?* True, the answer is supplied in the Book of Common Prayer. *"I do, and with God's grace I will follow him as my Savior and Lord."* But I pray that you and I learn to write our own essay as we daily decide to follow Jesus. I pray that we experience the liberty and the power of living under his authority. And not just experience it, but exercise it in love to the world.