

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY | JANUARY 28, 2024

DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20 | PSALM 111 | 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13 | MARK 1:21-28

The poet Anne Bradstreet once wrote, “Authority without wisdom is like a heavy axe without an edge, fitter to bruise than polish.” St. Mark would have certainly agreed.

In today’s reading from Mark’s gospel, Jesus continues his public ministry. So far, he’s proclaimed that the kingdom of God is near, he’s invited people to believe in the good news, and he’s called disciples.

And now that Jesus has started his ministry, you can see Mark turn to a question that everyone must have been wondering: who is this guy, exactly? Or, to be more precise, by what authority was he doing any of these things?

You could imagine Mark’s Jesus responding with the heavy axe approach. Get louder. Get more combative. Just barrel people over. Bruise people into submission.

But instead, Mark’s Jesus builds authority with wisdom. Not trying to wear people down so they become obedient. But by coming alongside people and inviting them to pay attention to what he’s doing so that he can earn their trust. We heard two examples of that in today’s gospel reading.

First, as part of the service at the synagogue, Jesus reads a portion of scripture and offers a commentary on it. By itself, this is not that unusual. But there’s something different in the way Jesus does it. Usually, one of the scribes would teach. And the way the scribes would teach is by passing on wisdom from the tradition. So they would read something from scripture, and then they would offer various commentaries from other people. It would be like if I got up to do the homily on Sunday, and I said, “You know, Pope Francis has this good homily on this today’s gospel reading. It’s probably better than anything I could come up with. So I’m just going to read what he said.” The scribes possess an impressive amount of knowledge. But they are always referring and deferring to others.

What makes Jesus unusual is that he gets up and starts teaching. And he knows the tradition. But he isn’t just quoting other people or deferring to their judgment. He doesn’t just have knowledge. He has wisdom. He’s teaching, Mark tells us, as someone with authority. And Mark tells us that the people in the synagogue were astounded. And they start to see Jesus as someone worthy of their trust.

But Mark wants to make clear that Jesus isn’t just someone with the authority to teach. And so he tells us a story about a man with an unclean spirit who also happens to be in the room. He writes, “Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘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.’”

To make this story useful to us, we have to remember that Mark has a pre-scientific worldview. He has no conception of things like germs or cells or DNA or vaccines. It was common, at the time Mark was alive, to ascribe various maladies to spirits. Where we would look at someone who is ill and assume that they may have picked up an infection, someone in Mark’s world would look at them and assume that some malevolent being had caused their affliction.

It can be tempting for us moderns to read Mark’s gospel and roll our eyes at this sort of thing. But I wonder if we’ve maintained more of Mark’s worldview than we like to admit. We don’t use the language of “spirits” often, but we still ascribe personhood to medical or even social

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afflictions. Think about the ways we talk about addiction or mental health, for example. In casual conversation, we'll often say that an addiction has a "hold" on someone. Or that depression has someone "in its grip." Or that someone who's going through a tough time is "fighting their demons."

These are metaphors, of course, and they aren't meant to be taken literally. But they give us some way to think about the predicament this man finds himself in. When he introduces us to this man in the synagogue, we don't know much about this person. But we know at least two things of great importance. One is that his life has been taken over by something that's severely inhibiting his experience of life.¹ The other thing we know is that this is something he can't get rid of through his own efforts. He needs help from outside his own resources.

And so Mark tells us, "Jesus rebuked [the spirit], saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'" Jesus liberates this man from what is possessing him. He frees him and restores him to newness of life.

The point that Mark is making with these two stories isn't just that Jesus is a teacher who has good advice. And it isn't just that Jesus can heal people. But that Jesus is someone who uses his power to create wholeness, create flourishing, and create peace. Jesus has our interests at heart. To use Bradstreet's image, Jesus combines authority with wisdom.

What's most remarkable about the authority that Jesus has is that he doesn't keep it to himself. Usually, we think of authority as a zero-sum game. If I give you authority, then I'm losing some of my authority. What's the word we use for people who hoard power? Authoritarians. They lay claim to as much authority as they can so that other people can't have it.

But Jesus takes this authority, and, later on in Mark's gospel, he gives it to the disciples. He gives them authority over the unclean spirits. He says, go do what I've been doing. Go teach. Go heal. Go proclaim that the fullness of God's reign is near. The authority Jesus entrusts to us is about liberating people from what binds us, from what constrains us, from what prevents us from living to God's glory and our neighbor's flourishing.

Some of you may know that our liturgy contains one reference to the presider's authority. There's one time during the service when I invoke the pastoral authority of my office. It's not before the reading of the gospel. It's not during the celebration of communion. It's not before the homily. It's in the declaration of forgiveness. "As a called and ordained minister of the church of Christ and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins." I use my authority to offer you newness of life.

This is true for all of us, not just clergy. The authority Jesus gives us is not the authority to coerce other people into doing things. It's the authority to offer new life. Jesus gives us the authority to stand up for the marginalized, to feed the hungry, to protect the creation, to accompany the lonely, and to care for the ill. And Jesus gives us the wisdom to be sensitive, caring, and humble in our service.

Authority without wisdom is a blunt axe. Wisdom without authority is just talk. But when the Holy Spirit brings the two together in our service, the kingdom of God comes near.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ When Mark says that the demon is "unclean," it's not a moral judgement. It means that it's drawing him away from peace and wholeness.