

“A Year in the Life of Jesus: Authority”

Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

Rev. L. Craig Foster

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There's this funny thing that happens in this MorningSong service many weeks, so much so that it has come to be sort of a personal joke for me. Almost every Sunday that I'm in here with you, right near the end of the service, after the sermon is over and we say the creed and we sing and we pray together, it comes time for the offering and the final song. And so I'll say something profoundly theological, like, "Let us stand as we offer our gifts and our voices to God." You guys much just be stunned by the profundity of the statement, because you guys all just sit there. So I'll start to my seat, and then Lisa will say, "Let's stand as we sing together 'Whom Shall I Fear'." And then, that's when you decide to stand. I think that says a lot about who has authority in this service!

Authority can be a very funny thing. Sometimes the people you think should have it don't, and the people you think really shouldn't have authority do. The teacher in a classroom tries in vain to get the class to settle down, but one of the kids in the class can get everyone to sit down and be quiet with just a word. The doctor says to do one thing, but we follow the medical advice of a friend or some website we've found instead. When we're shopping for something, do we pay more attention to consumer reports or Amazon reviews by the unknown masses? When it comes to the news, do we give more authority to the established news media or to the people on our Facebook or Twitter feed? Want to learn how to do something? There's no need to take a class from a certified instructor. Just watch some random person on YouTube do it. It's funny who we look to as our authorities for all sorts of things these days.

In our post-Watergate, Web 2.0 world the centers of authority have shifted away from the long-established institutions like the government or even the church and towards more democratized and idiosyncratic sources. In the information age, anyone can be an expert. The clearest example of this is probably the demise of the encyclopedia. How many of you grew up with volumes of World Book or Encyclopedia Britannica on your shelf? That's what we used for reports and papers back then. Those encyclopedias were the authority on just about everything – or at least everything before a certain year. And then you had to get the yearbook every year to update them. What those encyclopedias said had authority because a scholar wrote it and an editorial board accepted it. But now we have Wikipedia – that resource that is written and reviewed and constantly updated by the nameless masses. And we trust it because, well, obviously if someone cared enough to write about it on Wikipedia they must know a lot about it, and even if not, someone would have fixed it if it wasn't right. And as much as I would like to disparage it, I use Wikipedia almost every day, and I generally accept what it says without much question.

An interesting thing has happened in the Foster household in the past month. Christmas saw the introduction of a few Google Home devices into our home. Now I hold no illusions about how my family sees me. It has been a pretty long time since dear old Dad has really been the authority on, well, really anything! But whatever authority might have remained is now completely gone! Whereas before the authenticity of what I said was usually trusted enough that it just wasn't worth the trouble of getting a device out to check it. But now what little authority I had hung onto has been wiped out by the words: "Hey Google..." What kind of world do we live in today where this little pin-cushion-looking thing is given so much authority?

Our story from Mark this morning is all about who has authority and who doesn't, and it leaves everyone astounded. This is the first public act of Jesus ministry in Mark, and as such it sets the tone for how the Gospel

portrays Jesus throughout. In the Gospel of Matthew, the first thing Jesus does is preach the Sermon on the Mount, and throughout the Gospel Jesus is presented as the great teacher and new lawgiver. In Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by going into the synagogue, and reads from Isaiah, saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he said to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And they tried to throw him off a cliff for overturning the social structure.

Jesus’ first public act of ministry in Mark is also teaching in a synagogue, but what’s interesting we don’t get to hear anything of what he actually taught. Over and over again in Mark, people call Jesus “teacher”, but Mark doesn’t see fit to include a whole lot of his teachings. That’s not the point Mark is trying to make. That’s not the gospel he has to share. No, in Mark, Jesus is the message more than any message that he spoke. This passage is not about what Jesus taught, but how he taught, and that’s what astounded people.

Verse 22 says, “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” And that’s really odd because in many ways, authority is precisely what the scribes had and Jesus didn’t! The scribes were the designated authority over matters of interpretation of the Bible, but Jesus held no official office. His authority was different and somehow more powerful. His authority was intrinsic, coming from within him rather than through some bestowed office granted by another.

And here’s where it gets even weirder. Jesus is up there preaching and everyone is hanging on his every word, when all the sudden some crazy person in the congregation causes a scene and starts spouting off something about the “Holy One of God”. Jesus says, “Silence, and come out of him!” and the evil spirit convulses the man and he cries out. And how do the people respond to this outburst and the expulsion of the evil spirit? They say, ““What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” Jesus does this amazing and odd thing right before their eyes and they are still hung up on how good his sermon was. Even casting out this evil spirit serves to show that Jesus taught with authority. Even the evil spirit in this man recognizes the authority of Jesus as it declares Jesus to be the Holy One of God, and it obeys Jesus’ commands, further making Mark’s point. Even the evil spirit can’t help but give authority to the gospel of Jesus.

As the Gospel of Mark continues to unfold, so does Jesus’ authority over sin, over evil, over disease, over nature, and even over death. Jesus has authority even when he stands accused before the Sanhedrin and says nothing. Jesus has authority even when he stands before Pilate. Jesus has authority even on the cross. Jesus has authority not because of his station in life, but because of who he is as the Son of God and the Messiah. And what we can never forget is how Jesus uses his authority – not to coerce or serve himself, but to heal, to forgive, to comfort, to bring life.

And Jesus still has that authority today.

Who or what has authority for you? Whose voice do you listen to? I think if we really stopped to think about it, we might be surprised at who and what really has authority over our lives.

Is it one of these [Google Home]? Is it your news station or website of choice?

Is it the ideas that impact us through the TV shows, movies, and video games that we play? What is it?

Is it the voice of pragmatism that says we aren’t big enough to make a difference, or is it the voice of Jesus, who calls us to forget what’s pragmatic so that we can make a difference?

Is it the voice of fear that says bad things will happen if we try to do what we know is right, or is it the voice of Jesus, who says to not be afraid to show kindness and love?

Is it the voice of self-interest that says that looking out for number one is what matters, or is it the voice of Jesus, helping us to find our joy in giving?

Is it the voice of doubt that says that the promises are too wonderful to be believed, and that there is nothing more than what we see, or is it the voice of Jesus, inspiring us to believe the amazing gospel?

Is it the voice of hatred that says that they are not deserving of our love, or is it the voice of Jesus, reminding us that we are no more deserving of God's love than anyone else, and yet we all are loved nonetheless?

Is it the voice of the crowd that tries to convince us that sticking out is the worst evil of all, or is it the voice of Jesus, inviting us to stand out in a crowd because of our love?

Recognizing Jesus' authority in our lives doesn't silence all those other voices. So we have to listen above the din, and more than that we have to hold onto what we have already heard. And recognizing Jesus' authority in our lives doesn't change our circumstances, but it changes our path through them. And recognizing Jesus' authority doesn't make that path easier, but it does make it more and more clear, and in mysterious ways, more rewarding. And recognizing Jesus' authority gives us authority too – more than we realize – because we have been given this gospel to live and to share in what we do and what we say.

Jesus' authority rested at least in part in his authenticity. He lived as he spoke, and his amazing power confirmed what said. We all know the draw of authenticity. More than a degree or an office, someone who speaks and acts with authenticity demands our attention and our trust. We can have that power too. So much of Christianity today is not authentic. So much of it is superficial, failing to let Jesus's authority go very deep in our lives. So much of Christianity is hypocritical, unwilling to let Jesus' authority extend to our living. So much of Christianity is overly judgmental, forgetting the logs in our own eyes. So much of Christianity is selfish, forgetting the self-sacrificing love of Jesus on the cross. But even in all of that, there can authenticity even in weakness and failure – in struggling and trying and trusting in God's grace. Don't think you have to be a perfect Christian to be an authentic witness to Christ. The authentic witness to Christ is the one for whom Jesus holds authority even in weakness and failure – the one who places authority in the message of the cross and resurrection that brings new life time and again.

And if we are to be authentic, we use that power not to destroy, not to coerce, not to profit ourselves, not to win, but to make God's love known and to welcome all into it. Only then can Jesus be the authority in our lives and in the lives that we encounter.

May we too hear Jesus' teaching and see his power and never cease to be astounded!

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (NRSV) Ephesians 3:20-21