

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany

January 28, 2018

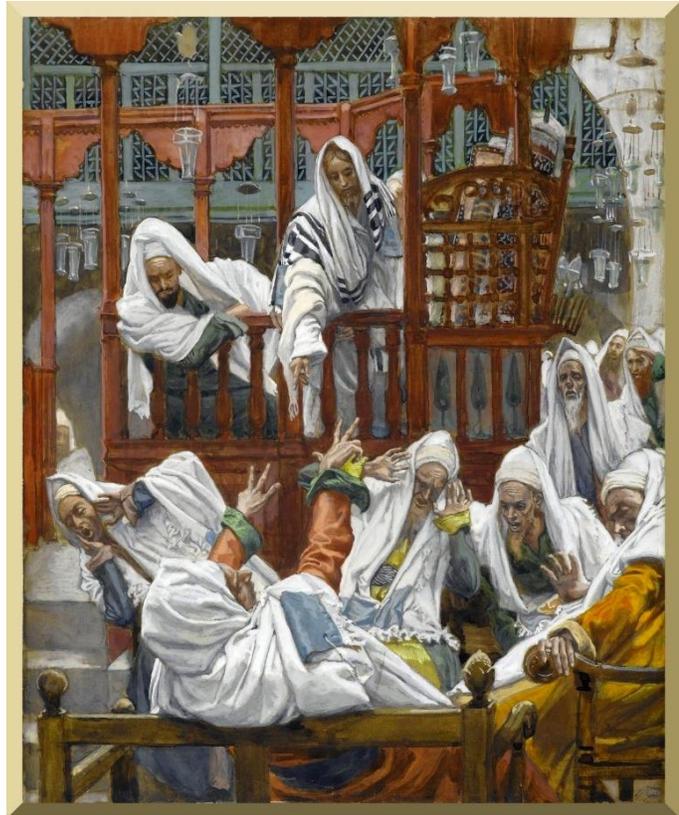
Dr. Susan F. Dewyngaert

Psalm 111

Mark 1:21-28

All Power and Authority

As we continue in our year-long series, Deeply Rooted, we are looking at the early days of Jesus' ministry in the first chapters of the Gospel of Mark. Mark, of course, is the oldest story of Jesus we have and today's reading is one of our first glimpses into the power and authority that he holds as the Son of God. Listen to Mark, chapter 1 beginning at verse 21.



"The Possessed man in the Synagogue" by James Tissot, ca 1890, Brooklyn Museum

They [that is, Jesus and his disciples] went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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.' ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'

²⁶And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.' ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let's pray together.

Amazing God, you send prophets and healers to save your people. They call us back to your covenant, and teach us your ways. In your amazing grace, in the fullness of time, you came to us in Jesus, teaching with such authority, that our eyes are opened and we are able to see ourselves and the world in the way you conceived it. As we look into his word and actions, open our minds

today. Help us examine ourselves in light of his authority. Give us understanding and the willingness to follow the one who taught with authority, even Jesus Christ. Amen.

Governor Hogan was here yesterday. He shared a reflection at the funeral service of Congresswoman Marjorie Holt, a member of Woods Church for 65 years. Meeting Governor Hogan put me in mind of something that happened in the 1950's when Christian Herter was governor of Massachusetts. Governor Herter was campaigning hard for a second term. One evening, after a busy day of chasing votes and no lunch, he arrived at a church barbecue. The governor was famished. As he moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She plopped a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.

"Excuse me" said the governor gently. "Could I please have another piece of chicken? I'm starved."

The woman shook her head, "No." "I'm only supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person."

Now Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but hunger will make people do unusual things. He decided that this was the time to throw a little weight around.

"Do you know who I am?" He asked. "I'm the governor of this state."

The woman looked at him steely eyed. "Do YOU know who I AM?" She replied. "I'm the church lady in charge of the chicken. Now move along."

And he did. Such is the nature of authority.

Have you ever seen the TV show *Undercover Boss*? I admit that I have seen the entire show only once. Just in case you haven't seen it at all – *Undercover Boss* is a reality show. In each episode an actual boss, someone in authority, the president or CEO of a company goes undercover, pretending to be an entry-level employee. So the person with power and authority is trained and works alongside her or his own employees. It's a great way for the CEO to find out what is actually going on in his/her company, and understand the workers' experience.

As you can imagine the undercover boss sometimes runs into a slacker or a bully, but more often he or she discovers a team of hard-working people who are struggling in all kinds of difficult circumstances. Some of the employees have spouses or children with various kinds of medical needs. Sometimes the executives meet people with exceptional talent and ambition. Some of the employees act entitled, some put down others, or play on their phones all day long.

At the end of each episode the CEO reveals his or her identity and the employees are shocked to discover that their top boss has now seen their work first hand. The workers who do a good job are often recognized by the boss, promoted or given special training or bonuses. And those who are trouble makers or who aren't living up to expectations, usually go away thinking, "If I had known that this was the one with authority, I would have given a better effort."

When Jesus arrived at the synagogue in Capernaum that day, he came as the one having all power and authority. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but he came as the lowliest servant. Like the employees on Undercover Boss, some of the people couldn't recognize him. A lot of people still don't. Some are blinded by his humble human appearance and his obedience, even to the point of death. Yet those of us who know him and love him, also long for him to be given all power and authority in our world. We know that our world desperately needs his redemption; we long for his peace.

The people of Capernaum were amazed; they exclaimed,

What's this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.

The Greek is *kainos*. *Kainos* does not mean new as in novel, not boring, but interesting and exciting. *Kainos* means unprecedented, previously unknown, radically different. People who knew him recognized that Jesus' authority was something entirely different, something that had never been seen or experienced before. His authority is still unique, still unprecedented in this world.

You know, Mark doesn't say what Jesus taught. I wish he had. Instead, he only tells us how Jesus taught – with authority over mental illnesses, addiction and all other kinds of afflictions. First century people usually referred to someone with a chronic illness as “*having an unclean spirit*.” Jesus has authority over really tenacious illnesses like that. Ask anybody who is several decades sober. After all, Jesus is the author of all life. A few verses after this in chapter 3, Jesus refers to himself as the strong Son of God, who enters into this world to battle and to bind evil,¹ even death itself. Mark wants to make sure we know this: Jesus is THE final authority He teaches not only in words, but with powerful deeds as well.

I want the whole world to know that. Don't you? I want my friends who are struggling with unbelief to know it. I wish they could recognize him as the perfect authority, the one who can guide them through their seemingly impossible bramble of questions and doubts. I want my loved ones who have to do battle with addictions and other kinds of mental and physical illnesses to know that he has power and authority over those demons. I want to live day to day as one who gives Jesus complete power and authority over my life, and the life of the world. I want that, but I don't always do it, and my guess is, neither do you.

Instead we give authority to others. We run after success like children running after flyaway balloons. We hand over authority to human beings who do not deserve it, because we think they can give us, or give our children that illusive thing we call success. And we pay a high price for that, such a high price for our misplaced loyalty.

I am heart broken, as I'm sure you are, listening, when I can stand to listen, to the victims who speak about the USA Gymnastics doctor who abused them. Parents, please tell your sons and daughters that no human being will ever have that kind of authority over you. I know the gymnasts' parents seriously tried to say that, but there are devils in this world. As adults we have to exercise our Christ-like authority to protect our children.

When I did my clinical training in a large, downtown Atlanta hospital, I worked with women who had been beaten nearly to death because they had been taught that they “had to submit to their husband’s biblical authority.” Parents, tell your sons and daughters that no human being will ever have that kind of authority over them. Ephesians 5:21 says that *we are subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.*ⁱⁱ Presbyterians are egalitarians. Never forget that. We are subject to one another, responsible for one another, out of reverence for Christ.

This happened many years ago, but I still remember it vividly. The mother of a 15-year old told me that she had evidence of some very risky and illegal things her son was involved in. She told me, “I don’t think it’s a good idea to confront him with this,” she said, “because I don’t want to ruin our good relationship.” Being very calm and gentle and pastoral, I said to her: “Woman, are you out of your mind!” Of course you have to talk to him; you have to set up clear boundaries, and exercise authority. If you don’t, it will cost you both much more than your good relationship. Parents, we must exercise our Christ-like authority to protect our children

Our children, our marriages, and schools and churches are crying out for a healthy, mutual exercise of authority. The first thing we have to do is give Jesus Christ full authority over our lives. That is the foundation. We have to be personally and deeply rooted in his perfect authority. We need to be all in. We cannot say that he is our Lord and Savior and then act like everything else matters more than he does.

Not a week goes by when one of you doesn't ask me about sharing faith with your children. And I know why. It's hard – to see your children and grandchildren do battle with the demons and to know that Jesus has power and authority to handle it. We feel powerless to help. Here's what I know. If we, as parents, grandparents, great grandparents give Jesus full power and authority in our lives, then our children will know. Talk to them. Explain how hard it is to put Jesus first, and how hard you try. Just be honest, and they will know.

The people in Capernaum knew. They recognized Jesus’ authority. They saw his power. We can see it too, if we try.

They saw the integrity of his word and deed. Do you see it?

They saw his knowledge of God, the power of his presence, and his understanding of the Kingdom of God. Do you see it?

His authority inspired fishermen to drop their nets and follow him. They saw him rule with sheer courage and quality of character and by the pure presence of God in his life.

This is sometimes hard to recognize in our time, because today we make our decisions and judgments based on quantitative measurements – data, polls, statistics, and bottom lines. The grounds for Jesus’ authority sometimes defy that kind of assessment. How do you measure God by the world’s standards? How do you quantify the Holy Spirit? We make things so much harder than it has to be. Jesus says simply:

*Seek first the Kingdom of God, and its righteousness. And all these things will be yours as well.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Seek Jesus first, above all else. Submit to his authority and his alone.

Authority. We are starved for it. We search and struggle only to realize, like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, that it's been right beside us all along. Like the Undercover Boss, can you recognize his power and authority in the humblest task? Can you recognize his presence in the most ordinary person, like the lady in charge of the chicken, or the winter relief guest, or the little child in Sunday school? Can you see him there, this one with authority to heal and reconcile and make new?

Look carefully and you will. Make him a promise today that he and he alone will be your absolute authority. Give him all honor, obedience and praise, and like the people in Capernaum you too will be amazed at his power!

There's a story I know you've heard, but it's worth repeating. It's about a ship, a U. S. Navy ship actually, although the Navy swears this isn't true, and I believe them. The fictional ship was off the coast of Newfoundland. The Navy ship saw the lights of an approaching ship and radioed,

“Divert your course by 15 degrees.”

The Canadians radioed back, “Recommend you adjust YOUR course by 15 degrees!”

“This is the Captain. We are a large ship. I say again: Divert your course.”

“No,” came back the reply, “Divert your course.”

“Look,” said the US officer. “This is an aircraft carrier. We are a large warship. Divert your course at once!”

The Canadian radio operator paused for a moment, and then radioed back, “This is a lighthouse. It's your call.”

There's a song that our youth love to sing at Woods Work and in worship. It's called My Lighthouse and it speaks of Jesus as the Light shining in a dark place. Part of the lyrics say:

My lighthouse, my lighthouse
Shining in the darkness; I will follow you.
My lighthouse, my lighthouse
I will trust the promise
You will carry me safe to shore. ^{iv}

Amen!

ⁱMark 3:27

ⁱⁱEphesians 5:21

ⁱⁱⁱMatthew 6:33

^{iv}“My Lighthouse” by Rend Collective, 2014