

“Authority”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 29, 2012
Scripture: Mark 1:21-28

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *We come before you this day, O Lord, asking you to draw us away from the distractions of the world. Fill us with your Spirit so we will be ready to serve you for who you are, and not what we would rather imagine you to be. Amen.*

Maybe you’ve heard the story about the High School teacher who injured his back and had to wear a plaster cast around the upper part of his body. It was form fitted, fit under his shirt and wasn’t noticeable at all. The first day of the school year, he still had the cast on. He looked at his class roster and realized that he had been assigned to the toughest students in school.

He walked into the classroom, which was already rowdy and noisy. All the students were talking and laughing and either acted like he wasn’t there or looked at him with disdain, daring him to say something, anything. The teacher walked over and opened a window as wide as possible and then started working at his desk. Several times a strong breeze made his tie flip up into his face. Finally, he reached over, picked up the stapler and stapled the tie to his chest in three places and then continued working.

The class immediately quieted down and he didn’t have any problems with discipline problems that entire year. Don’t you wish you had that kind of authority? I don’t know about you, but I usually feel much more like Rodney Dangerfield than that teacher.

That wasn’t a problem Jesus had in the story we read this morning from Mark’s Gospel. Today’s text is really the first time we see Jesus in action in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus appears at the synagogue in Capernaum at the regular Sabbath service.

On that Sabbath day Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum, Mark tells us. The people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them “as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.” Isn’t that an interesting phrase?... “as one who had authority...”

So where does authority come from? If you’ve ever been in the military or a highly structured business environment, you know where it comes from. It comes from rank or position in a hierarchy.

James Fixx published a book of games which he called, *More Games for the Super-Intelligent*. In that collection he offers this wonderfully challenging puzzle from a military setting: You are a captain in charge of one sergeant and four men. Your task is to raise a 100-foot flagpole and slide it into a hole 10-feet deep. You have two ropes – one 22-feet long and one 26-feet long, two shovels, and two buckets. How do you accomplish your task?

The answer is this: Since you’re the captain, you turn to the sergeant and say, “Sergeant, get the flagpole up!” That’s positional authority. You command those who are under you, and they obey.

Some people have authority because of their rank or position. Others have authority because of their personality, or their knowledge or their extreme competence.

As a carpenter, Jesus had no positional authority in the community. His authority came from his wisdom and knowledge and his competence at interpreting God’s Word. Even as a boy Jesus wowed people with wisdom and his grasp of scripture. Of course the people in Capernaum could not know that his authority came from a more important source. All they knew is that they had never heard an individual teach like Jesus taught. They said to one another, “He teaches as one who has authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

But even Jesus got interrupted from time

to time. And so it was on this day. There was a man in the synagogue who disrupted Jesus’ teaching. Mark tells us this man was “possessed by an impure spirit”. We assume this is pre-scientific language for mental illness, but who knows? Whatever the origin of his problem, it is obvious that he was deeply distressed. He cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!”

Isn’t it interesting that the impure spirits recognized who Jesus was long before the people of Capernaum.

“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” And then something remarkable happened. The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”

So Jesus had authority because of his teaching. In this story his authority was over “impure spirits”. In other places we see his authority over disease, and over nature, and even over death.

The most important thing about Jesus and his authority we need to affirm is that he was unique. There was no one quite like him.

There were other fine teachers in Galilee, but they could not cast out impure spirits, or turn water into wine, or heal the leper, or multiply the fishes and the loaves or forgive sins. There was something about Jesus which could not be said about any of his contemporaries. He had authority – physical authority, spiritual authority, and moral authority. Even after his death and resurrection, he had authority. When confronted by someone who was demon possessed or who was blind or physically-challenged, all the disciples had to do was evoke Jesus’ name and demons were cast out and the physically-challenged were made whole and the blind could

see. That, my friends, is authority!

Singer and songwriter Gloria Gaither put it this way as a part of a musical that she and her husband composed several years ago:

“Jesus. The mere mention of His name can calm the storm, heal the broken, raise the dead...I’ve heard a mother softly breathe His name at the bedside of a child delirious with fever, and I’ve watched that little body grow quiet and the fevered brow cool. I’ve sat beside a dying saint, her body racked with pain, who in those final fleeting seconds summoned her last ounce of ebbing strength to whisper earth’s Sweetest name, Jesus, Jesus...Emperors have tried to destroy it; philosophers have tried to stamp it out. Tyrants have tried to wash it from the face of the earth with the very blood of those who claim it. Yet still it stands...Jesus...” That, my friends, is authority!

The distinguished British intellectual Malcolm Muggeridge put it like this:

“I may... I suppose...pass for a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets – that’s fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Internal Revenue – that’s success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions – that’s pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our time – that’s fulfillment. Yet, I say to you and I beg you to believe me and multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing, less than nothing...measured against one drink of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are.” That, my friends, is authority!

Jesus was a wonderful teacher, but no mere teacher has the authority to raise the dead. Jesus was a leader, a prophet, a moral visionary but none of these explain his impact on

civilization. As some unknown writer expressed it a generation ago:

“Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40 and Jesus for only 3 ½ years. Yet the influence of Christ’s ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined years of teaching from these greatest of philosophers.

Jesus painted no pictures, yet some of the finest artists such as Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him.

Jesus wrote no poetry, but Dante, Milton and scores of the world’s greatest poets were inspired by Him

Jesus composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in His praise.

Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble Carpenter of Nazareth.” That, my friends, is authority!

Remember, Jesus did more than staple his tie to his chest. He gave Himself up to be nailed to the cross for our sin and for our sake. No wonder everyone was amazed by Jesus. No wonder he had such amazing authority. Does Jesus have that authority in your life? Have you invited Him to be the core of your beliefs, the rock upon which to stand and build your life? My friends, Jesus IS the true authority, my prayer is that each of us has given Him that authority in our lives.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

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