

Date: January 28, 2018

Scripture: Mark 1:21-28

Title: JESUS' AUTHORITY?

Today's lesson from Mark's Gospel is one that troubles many modern Christians. Jesus and his disciples are in Capernaum. Capernaum was a fishing town located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. It was a fairly large city of about ten thousand people and lay along a major trade route. When Jesus began his public ministry he made Capernaum his home.

Our story takes place on the Sabbath. Jesus has gone into the synagogue and begins to teach. The people are amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. While he was teaching a man in the synagogue who, Mark tells us, "was possessed by an impure spirit," 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!"

What in the world is an "impure spirit?" Certainly ancient people believed in impure spirits and demons. In his commentary on the New Testament, William Barclay points out that in ancient cemeteries skulls have been found in which a hole had been drilled. The shocking thing is that, it's clear from bone growth surrounding the hole, that this boring took place while the patient was still alive. Sounds horrific. The reason for drilling this hole was to allow demons to escape from the body.

This is but one of various forms of exorcism, the driving out of demons, some of which have continued even up to the present day, but not without some controversy.

The Lutheran church first restricted and then abolished exorcism by 1600. Not long after, Calvinists renounced the practice, as applicable only for Jesus' day. We don't put much stock in impure spirits or demons today.

We really don't know what the New Testament means when it speaks of casting out impure spirits. Is it referring to mental and emotional illness? Would physical problems with unusual manifestations, such as epilepsy, have been considered demonic in a pre-scientific world? Most scholars are convinced that this is the nature of so-called demon possession in the Scriptures. Does this mean that we should forget these stories and consign such problems to modern medicine and psychiatry? Absolutely not! Jesus still casts out demons whether they're physical, emotional or spiritual.

We don't know what to make of demon possession today, but Jesus took the man seriously. He saw a man in front of him who, for whatever reason, needed help and, quite naturally, he helped him. Jesus sternly said, "Be quiet! Come out of him!" Mark tells us, "The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek."

Here's how the story ends: Mark tells us, "The people were 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.’ News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.”

And no wonder, a person with that kind of authority is going to attract attention. Where did that authority come from? Why did Jesus create such a dramatic reaction, both positively and negatively from everyone he met?

Jesus’ authority came, from his relationship with his Father. As someone has noted, the teachers of the law in Jesus’ time didn’t speak with their own authority. They usually prefaced their comments with something like “There is a saying that . . .” or “Rabbi Such-and-Such has said that . . .”

Even the prophets rightly attributed their pronouncements to “Thus says the Lord . . .” But Jesus said simply, “I say to you . . .” How could Jesus do that and have people take him at his word? It was because of his relationship with the Father. Jesus and his Father were one. That was the primary source of Jesus’ authority, his relationship with his Father. But there were other sources of his authority.

Jesus’ authority also came from his genuine commitment to serving people. It made no difference who they were, or what their need was, Jesus was there to serve. Onlookers in today story were amazed at the change Jesus made in this man, but his willingness to engage with the man in the first place (a nobody), an obviously troubled spirit, an outcast, impressed them just as much. When he made a difference in this man’s life, it gave them the confidence, that he could make a difference in their lives. Jesus healed people and gave them hope. He still gives people hope today.

Dr. Diane Komp is a pediatric oncologist; she specializes in treating children who are suffering from cancer. Through her work with suffering children, she has moved from being an agnostic, to being a follower of Jesus. One of her favorite quotes comes from a former patient: “For the Christian, the Big C is not cancer; the Big C is Christ.” Jesus is the big C. That’s authority. Jesus genuinely cares about people who are hurting.

This authority also comes from his willingness to do whatever is necessary to accomplish that which he was sent to accomplish. Any leader who is willing to give his or her all, is going to gain the respect of his or her followers, and certainly that was true of Christ. That’s what the cross is all about.

Out of World War II comes the story of a platoon of American soldiers stranded on one side of a mine field they had to cross. The commander came up with a plan: one man would walk across the mine field, leaving clear footprints for others to follow. If this first man hit a mine, then another man would walk across the field in his footsteps, until finally someone had cleared a path for all the other soldiers.

With their hearts in their throats, the young soldiers agreed to the plan. Which one would be chosen to walk the field first? To their surprise, the commander began walking across the field. As their leader, he insisted on risking his life for the sake of his men.

The commander crossed the field safely. Following closely in his footsteps, all the soldiers made it across the field.

Jesus above all persons was willing to do whatever was necessary to accomplish what his Father had sent him to do. His authority came from his relationship with the Father. His authority came from his genuine commitment to serving people. And his authority came from his willingness to do whatever it took, even sacrificing his own life, to accomplish that for which he was sent.

But there's one more reason for Christ's authority. **It's the continuing influence, Jesus has in our world two thousand years after his death and resurrection.** No one who has ever lived, has had the influence on human society that Christ has had.

Rodney Stark, a sociologist at the University of Washington, points out that when a major plague hit the ancient Roman Empire, Christians surprisingly had a high survival rate. It's because most Roman citizens would banish any plague-stricken person from their household. But because Christians had no fear of death, they nursed their sick instead of throwing them out on the streets. Therefore, many Christians survived the plague. Well, why didn't Christians fear death? Because Jesus (their Master) taught them that he's the resurrection and the life and therefore death had no hold over them. He also taught them to love one another. That's how people knew they were his followers, by their love. And so many Christians survived the plague. One of the sources of Christ's authority through the ages, has been his influence on those who follow him.

Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," painted over 500 years ago, is considered one of the classic masterpieces in the history of art. According to author Michael J. Gelb, this painting was done in a circular motif. Everything on the table is round, such as the bread and the plates. Also, the disciples are arranged in a half-circle on either side of Jesus. There was a distinct purpose behind da Vinci's use of the circular theme. As Mr. Gelb writes, "Like a stone tossed into the still pond of eternity, Leonardo conveys Christ's influence rippling out to change human destiny forever."

That's authority, when your words and your actions send out ripples of influence that outlast your life.

An anonymous author made this striking observation: "Socrates taught for forty years, Plato for fifty, Aristotle for forty, and Jesus for only three. Yet the influence of Christ's three-year ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching from these men who were among the greatest philosophers of all antiquity. Jesus painted no pictures; yet some of the finest paintings of 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 hymns, symphonies, and

oratorios they composed in His praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by the humble Carpenter of Nazareth.

No one who has ever lived had the authority Jesus had. It came from his relationship with his Father, it came from his genuine commitment to serving people, it came from his willingness to do whatever it took, including giving his own life, and it comes from his continuing influence to this day. And that's why I have the authority to say to you, Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord. Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.