

Who's In Charge Here?
Deuteronomy 18: 15 -20
Mark 1: 21-28

They were astounded at his teaching, for [Jesus] taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Mark does not tell us exactly what Jesus was teaching. A portion of the Torah? Something from Isaiah or another of the prophets. A psalm? We don't know. But, whatever it is, this Jesus speaks with the voice of authority. They were used to listening to the scribes - professional interpreters of Jewish law - but somehow Jesus is different and the people who have gathered in the synagogue know it right away. As one commentator put it: "He spoke himself. He was not just a set of interesting thoughts about God. He took up space. He carved out room for himself. He was nothing less than God among us." (Willimon 23)

In your life, what does the voice of authority sound like?

...there was in their synagogue a man [possessed] 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." But Jesus performed an exorcism. He drew the demon – the unclean spirit - out of the man and the people were astounded again: *"What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him."*

In your life, what does authority look like?

I've been thinking about this word 'authority'. By definition authority is "the right and power to command, enforce laws, exact obedience,

determine or judge; also, power to influence or persuade resulting from knowledge or experience; also, an accepted source of expert information or advice; also, a claim to be accepted or believed; also, a statement or decision that provides adequate grounds for a course of action or that may be taken as a precedent.

Jesus spoke and acted with such authority – with all the multiple aspects and ramifications of the definition. He spoke and acted with an authority that could have come only from God.

In some respects, Jesus falls in the line of the prophets of Israel that Doug read about in the passage from Deuteronomy. Moses told the people under his leadership that after he is gone, God would raise up others like him to be prophets. God, he said, will give them words to say and the people are to obey as if it were God himself speaking.

In the Hebrew scriptures, prophets were very different from the established religious leaders- the kings and the priests. They were charismatic and often eloquent speakers and preachers, appearing on the scene suddenly and spontaneously, breaking into the rigid and detached religious atmosphere like a bolt of lightening or a piercing shaft of sunlight.

The prophets claimed authority directly from God. The words of the prophets were the Word of God - the challenging truth, the call for repentance, and the promise of change and renewal.

Jesus spoke and acted as such a prophet, with an authority that could come only from God.

Certainly we are far, far away from the time when Jesus walked the earth. The world is hugely more complex. We recognize a multitude of

authorities – governmental legal, medical, educational, business, financial, religious. In every aspect of our living, there is someone in authority over us, to whom we report, in relation to whom we are junior, to whom we look for expertise or guidance, on whom we rely.

In some situations, we are the authority. Parents, you have authority over your children. Some of you are teachers; you have authority in your classrooms. Others own their own businesses or are part of a management team or a partnership; you have authority over those who are in your employ. Skilled professionals, technicians and artists, you have authority in the practice of your craft.

No matter what our vocation, however, or where we are situated on the authority scale, the one place where most of us would like to feel that we have authority is in our own personal lives. We are free thinkers, independent, in charge, self-reliant individuals.

But we also call ourselves Christians, which of course, does more than suggest – it demands – that we acknowledge the authority of Jesus in our lives. Hmm... Sounds like a conflict. Who is in charge?

Because we are Christians, we acknowledge that Jesus is in charge, just as people learned long ago, when Jesus walked the earth. That does not mean that we are not free, but it does mean that we are not self-sufficient. We do not have to take on the burden of trying to be, or pretending to be, the ultimate authority in our lives. Thank God.

- For it means that we do not live alone and lonely, but in the community of others who have faith in Christ.
- When we are beset by demons – stress, loss, anxiety, anger, depression, all manner of suffering – it means that Jesus has authority over them to drive them from our lives.

- It means that we understand that we are part of a larger motion picture, which God is directing – one tiny pixel on a huge screen – important, yes, but not the whole movie. And that as time goes by, the scenes change and we exit the set toward life eternal.

Let me share with you a poem that I read to the Consistory at the beginning of the year at the close of their annual retreat. It seems to express very well the choices we are free to make within the loving authority of God.

I am a tenant of this earth, Lord, a lucky soul,
to whom you have given a generous lease of life.

The rent? You've asked for none, except
that I have faith and live accordingly. And so,

I dedicate this year to you, Lord, with a promise
to improve in spirit, mind and body,

the run-down property that bears my name.
This year I'll try to keep the house where I reside

as you would have me keep it – structure firm,
chambers clean, windows shining from inside

with such a light that passersby will stop to ask,
“Who lives here?” or “Who owns this lovely place?”

and I shall tell them with a humble nod,
“I'm just a tenant here.
The owner who deserves your praise is God.”

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, Jesus said. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Willimon, William H. "Astonishment." *Pulpit Resource*. 37.1 Feb. 2009, 21-24.

Rev. Kathryn Henry
Peapack Reformed Church
Gladstone, NJ
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