

Mark 1:21-28

Epiphany 4B + January 29, 2012
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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With Authority

The Word of the Lord from Mark 1: "And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. A Demon Speaks the Truth

Jesus astonishes the men in the synagogue because He teaches as one who has authority, but what exactly does that mean? Is it that the scribes are, to a man, the most soft-spoken and unconvincing men ever gathered into one vocation? Is it a job requirement that they sound as uncertain as possible? That doesn't sound right: the scribes are pretty forceful throughout the Gospels, especially when they're accusing Jesus of blasphemy and calling for Him to be crucified. Furthermore, it's hardly in keeping with the Old Testament requirements for preachers for them to end their proclamations with something like "This *might be* the Word of the Lord," or "Then again, what do I know?"

No, I'm quite sure that a scribe of that era never finished reading a text at the synagogue, turned to the crowd and said, "I'd like to go around the room and have each of you share what this text means to you."

So was does it mean that Jesus speaks with authority, unlike the scribes? Is He just more forceful in comparison to them? Does He have extra charisma that makes you stand up and take notice? Does He make His arguments with a convincing look in His eye that makes people say, "I think He really believes this stuff?" That's not it, either.

If you want a sample of how Jesus speaks with authority, look at the next part of the text:

²³And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, ²⁴"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, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.

That's a clear example of speaking with authority. Jesus tells a demon to shut up and go away, and the unclean spirit has no choice but to shut up and go away. Jesus sends the little devil fleeing.

Now, contrast that to a couple of other examples from the Scriptures. The book of Job begins with Job afflicted by the devil, who is permitted by God to take away everything Job has: family, home, riches and livestock are all destroyed. Remember what Job says as he sits on the rubble that was once his house: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). That's an astonishing confession of faith—the Bible calls it a sinless response. But it doesn't have authority. Job can't say to the devil, "Go away" and expect Satan to run for cover. His words don't have that kind of power. All that is left for Job to do is to speak of God, for God has the power to deliver him from the devil—but only when God, in His authority, wants to.

One more example comes from Acts 19, where we find seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva. They watch Paul work wonders and cast out demons in the name of Jesus, so they decide to try their hand at it, too. They surround a man who is possessed and try to cast out the demon saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims." (Act 19:13). But just because God has given that authority to Paul doesn't mean He's given it to them: in this case, the unclean spirit responds, "Jesus I

know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?" (Act 19:15). The demon then incites the man he possesses to beat the stuffing out of *all seven of them* until they flee naked and wounded.

Neither Job nor the sons of Sceva can speak with authority they don't have. They can say to unclean spirits, "I sure wish you would go away," but they can't compel the unclean spirits to leave. The devil is greater than they are, and there's nothing they can do about that.

So Jesus comes along to Capernaum, confronts this unclean spirit and says, "Be silent and come out of him!", and the demon doesn't have a choice in the matter. Jesus has the authority, and His Word thus has the power to cast out unclean spirits. So what gives Jesus this authority—why is He different from the scribes?

Oddly, it's the unclean spirit who provides the answer: "I know who You are—the Holy One of God!" The men in the synagogue know the term "Holy One" very well: it's all over the Old Testament. The Holy One of Israel is God Himself. When the unclean spirit calls Jesus the Holy One of God, he declares Jesus to be exactly who He is: God of God, God Himself. There, in the synagogue, the demon gets it absolutely right: Jesus is God in the flesh, and He has come to destroy the devil, sin and death. It may be a demon talking, but he's talking truth. Throughout the Gospels, all sorts of people are trying to figure out who Jesus and what He's up to. Ironically, this is one time when they should listen to a demon, because the unclean spirit is preaching a better sermon than nearly all the scribes and Pharisees will.

So why does Jesus shut him up? Because people are going to jump to all sorts of sinful conclusions. If Jesus is the Holy One of God, this means—of course—that He's all-powerful and invincible. That means, of course, that He's going to go about saving people by being all-mighty and by mightily vanquishing His enemies. After all, if He can cast out demons just by speaking with authority, what else can He do? In other words, they're going to expect an indestructible superhero.

That isn't what they're going to get. You know this well: the Holy One of God, the One who least needs to serve or submit to anybody, is going to serve the world by submitting to their death. He has come to fulfill the Law on behalf of mankind, and that requires active service and love to all. It also requires a terrible passive service: the Law declares that the sinner must die for his sins, and so Jesus is going to take the place of sinners and die their death. The Holy One of God is going to be condemned by God for being the most unholy sinner of all. That's how He is to be the Savior: the almighty Son of God becomes flesh to make the ultimate sacrifice in love for fallen man; and by that sacrifice, He will defeat sin and death and devil. That's what He has authority to do.

As He says in John 10:17-18, "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from My Father."

II. Speaking with Authority in the Church

It is a privilege and responsibility to speak with authority. If you have authority from God, then words do things. If you don't have authority, then your words have no power—all you can do is give suggestions and hope for the best. This is evident in the matter of unclean spirits in the Gospels. As we said before, Jesus speaks with authority: so when He says to the unclean spirits, "Shut up and leave," they have no choice but to obey. As we read further in the Gospel of Mark, we find that Jesus gives the twelve apostles authority over unclean spirits (Mark 6:7); and because He does so, they are able to cast them out. Now, if Peter were to say, "I command you in the name of Peter to be silent and come out," the unclean spirit would have a good laugh and perhaps give Peter a good beating. But if Peter were to say, "In the name of Jesus, be silent and come out," the unclean spirit would have no choice. The apostles have no power in themselves: the power is found in the Word of God.

Now, we'd better revisit the sons of Sceva whom I mentioned before. They attempted to cast out an evil spirit in the name of Jesus and received a serious beat-down for their efforts. Why? Because while they used the right name, they didn't have the authority. An analogy would be that I cannot negotiate treaties with foreign nations, even if I do so in the name of the United States, because I do not have the authority to do so. Neither did the sons of Sceva have authority to cast out that spirit in Jesus' name.

So all of this is to lead to the question, "What has Jesus given His Church the authority to do?"

The answer is given clearly in the Scriptures, in Matthew 28:18-20. "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The Church is given authority to make disciples. How is this done? Disciples are made by baptizing. This isn't an empty rite or mere symbol. Baptism is given by Jesus with His authority. Baptism doesn't proclaim to the one baptized, "By this water and the Word, I suggest that it would be a good idea for you to follow Jesus now." It gives forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil (and his unclean spirits), and gives eternal salvation. Jesus calls baptism being "born again by water and the Spirit" in John 3. At your first birth, your mother didn't say, "I think it would be a good idea for you to decide to emerge from the womb now." Birth was done to you, and it gave you life. Likewise, Holy Baptism is done to you and it gives you life, joining you to Jesus in His death and resurrection.

The Church is given authority to teach—specifically to teach the Word of God. This is to be a teaching with authority, and this is defined in John 20: "[Jesus] breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.'"

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them," says Jesus. This is what we call the Office of the Keys. By His authority, Christians forgive sins—not just between human beings, but before God. We so often underestimate and neglect how important this is. When Jesus performed miracles, one of His reasons for doing so was to demonstrate that He had power to perform a greater miracle—the forgiveness of sins. After all, if a leper is miraculously healed of his leprosy, he is still going to hell if he doesn't believe. But if he is forgiven for his sins, he is going to live forever, and fully healed. Forgiveness is the greater miracle; and when a Christian declares to a repentant sinner, "I forgive you in the name of Jesus," he's not just saying, "I sure hope you feel forgiven, or that you find a way to make this up between you and God." That Word, spoken on Jesus' authority, miraculously takes sins away and gives eternal life.

Likewise, it is given to the Church to tell unrepentant sinners, "Because you do not repent, your sin is still bound to you and you face God's judgment." We do not speak such words to effect their destruction on the spot, but to warn them that God knows of their sin and that judgment is coming—if *they do not repent*. It is not given to us to effect judgment, only to warn of it. Thus, as St. Paul says, we speak both God's Law and His Gospel for the purpose of building up (2 Corinthians 10:8).

Along with Baptism and the Word, we note that Jesus adds His Word to bread and wine in the Holy Communion, and directs His Church to celebrate that Supper often for the forgiveness of sins. This meal gives forgiveness to penitent Christians, too, because it carries Jesus' authority to do so.

How sad it is, then, when Christians and congregations deny the authority that Jesus gives. This happens in different ways. In many churches, it is taught that you're saved by your own free will and decision—not by the power of God. You decide to be a believer by your choice, and you choose to be baptized to show your dedication to Jesus. In effect, you are a Christian because you say so. Our brothers and sisters in Christ in these churches rob themselves of much comfort. Which is more certain:

that you are a Christian because you say so, or because Jesus says so *on His authority*? No, what comfort it is to declare, "In the name of Jesus, your sins are forgiven," not "You are forgiven as long as you believe sincerely enough that they are."

It is common for churches to neglect the authority that Jesus has given in another way: it is when they neglect the message of Law and Gospel, of sin and grace, and instead adopt the tactic of trying to make the Bible practical for daily living. For instance, many churches will make the message all about relationship advice, financial security, self-improvement, even marital intimacy. We've talked about this before, but I bring it up again that you might see it in a different light. Even if all of the counsel provided in such preaching is sound and helpful, it isn't authoritative. All of it comes with the theme, "You really ought to be doing these things." So you really ought, sure: but none of this carries Jesus' authority to forgive your sins, strengthen your faith and give you eternal life. All sorts of people and agencies can give you all sorts of good advice: it is the privilege of the Church to forgive sins.

So you delight in the authority that Jesus gives to the Church, so that Christians may speak with authority. By the death and resurrection of Jesus, He has won the battle and gained the power to forgive sins. By the authority He gives, we speak His Word of Gospel to give grace and eternal life. We have a far better message than fond wishes or advice entrusted to us by the Savior. Therefore, I do not tell you, "I sure hope that you find forgiveness." I do not say, "I really, really wish that your sins would go away and not be counted against you."

No, I tell you, "You are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." Amen