

WITH AUTHORITY!

Mark 1:21-28

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany (Series B)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Mark*, chapter 1, verses 21 through 28. In this gospel lesson, we see the divine authority of Jesus Christ. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Mark 1, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

²¹ And they went into Capernaum, and immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. ²² And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes. ²³ And 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." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the day is "authority."

Do we like authority? I'm not even asking about Christians specifically, but humans in general. Do we like authority? Examine your own thoughts and feelings toward authority. Do you like it or not? I'm rambling a little bit, because I want you to have a few seconds to think about it. Ramble, ramble, ramble. Do we like authority? We have a conflicting attitude about it, don't we? Sometimes we like it, and sometimes we don't. You might say we have a "love-hate" attitude toward authority. But it's really more primal than that. We crave it, and we want to devour it. We are living contradictions. We crave a strong authority, but when it doesn't give us what we desire, it's like a flip of a switch, and we want to overthrow it.

This contradictory attitude testifies of both creation and the fall into sin. We crave authority because we were created to live under God's authority. So our craving is hardwired into the way God made us. But the fall into sin crossed up our wires. It didn't completely remove our craving for authority, but it corrupted us. So we still crave it, but when it doesn't give us what we desire, we seek to overthrow it. I'll give you two examples.

First, we see it in children. Children crave their parents' authority. And it's not just because parents use their authority to provide food, shelter, and protection. But children crave the rules too. They want the moral structure. It gives them emotional stability. They're comfortable when they know what to expect. And when they know someone else is guarding the limits, they're confident to try new things. So children crave their parents' authority. But sometimes their wires get crossed. We even have a special word for this. It's called a "tantrum." It happens most often

when children don't get what they want, but sometimes it happens for no apparent reason. It can be completely irrational. Children turn into these little monsters who would devour their parents if they could. They say awful things, like, "I wish you weren't my mom," and, "You're the worst dad in the world." They kick and scream and hit their parents. And children don't really do this with other people. They might fight with their siblings and friends, and they might disrespect their teachers, but the wild tantrums are reserved for mom and dad. That's because parents are an immovable authority to them. They get frustrated when they can't move this authority, but they also feel safe to throw the tantrum, because they know mom and dad won't leave them. They can kick and scream, and, somehow, everything will still be okay in the end. Children crave their parents' authority, but sometimes they also rage against it. That's the first example.

A second example is a way we see it in adults. Adults still crave strong leaders. So politics has become an especially great idol in America. And this is a bipartisan sin. I'm not trying to pick on the other guy; I'm actually trying to pick on you. We expect government to function as a god.

By the way, if you're curious if you have made government an idol, here's a diagnostic test for you: When something triggers you, what do you do first? Do you think of public policy? Or do you pray? When something gets you really agitated, who do you look to for salvation? Do you think, *This is why we need this policy*, and, *If only so and so had been elected*? Or do you pray? Now there's room for both responses. We can look to God for salvation, and we can care about public policy. But if our first thought is government, it means we have made an idol of it.

We look around our society and we see massive problems. People all across the political spectrum seem to agree on that. We completely disagree on what the real problems are, or how to fix them, but we agree there are problems, and we usually look to government to fix them. Sometimes it can, but most of the time it can't. But we don't accept that, because we crave government's authority. We crave strong leaders. And there are no leaders capable of doing what we expect of them, because they're not God. But we elect the ones who convince us they can. We crave government's authority. So then government either fails to live up to our expectations, or the guy we don't want gets elected, and we throw an adult tantrum. And adult tantrums range from being more civil than toddler tantrums to far less civil. It might be a rant in front of your spouse, calling people names on social media, or an actual riot. These are all the result of our corrupted craving for authority. We are made to live under authority, so we crave it, but we also desire to devour it. We are living contradictions.

Authority comes from God. This is the most basic truth concerning authority. "There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). God instituted authorities in the home, in his Church, and in the state. Every legitimate authority functions by God's authority, even if they don't recognize God as the source. So we can rightly say that they are doing the Lord's work. Authorities are gifts from God to us. In each of the three estates, that is, the Church, the home, and government, God has instituted authority for our good. Authority does not exist for the benefit of the person who holds it. It exists for the benefit of those under the authority. Sometimes in our fallen world, we reverse this. People with power and authority seem to use it to serve themselves. Sometimes this is actually true. Sometimes we just think it's true, because that's what we would do if we had authority. But that's not how God instituted authority, and he will hold those authorities accountable who abuse their power. Remember that our authorities have an Authority above them. Authorities exist to serve those

under authority. And nowhere is this more clearly seen than with the highest authority, God himself.

Consider in this Gospel lesson how Jesus uses his authority.

First, Jesus manifests his authority in the way he teaches. This is early in Jesus' ministry. It occurs immediately after he called his first disciples, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John. We talked about them last week. In this week's lesson, after calling them, they went into Capernaum, which apparently is where Jesus lived (2:1). He was raised in Nazareth, but apparently moved to Capernaum sometime as an adult. Both towns were in Galilee, the northern region of Israel. Capernaum was beside the Sea of Galilee. Thus the connection to the fishermen. After Jesus called these first four disciples, on the Sabbath day, he goes to the synagogue and teaches. This demonstrates that the people in Capernaum already recognized him to be a rabbi. They welcome him to teach. But when they hear him teach, there is something starkly different about him. "He taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes" (1:22).

You would think that the scribes would speak with authority. They were well-educated, so you think they would speak authoritatively on religious matters. But that's not always the case. Sometimes a person can idolize academia to the point that they lose conviction.

I remember visiting with a seminary student once. He wasn't from our seminary, I'm kind of happy to say. And we talked about all sorts of theological topics. And with every topic, he would say something like, "There are three schools of thought on that." He seemed to take pride in being able to catalog everyone else's beliefs. So I would ask him, "What do you believe?" And he would say, "I'm undecided." This happened over and over again with several different topics, and I eventually realized that this man didn't want to believe anything, because that would mean submitting to authority. He preferred to hold himself above the study of theology. In this way he could be the academic authority, but without actually having any convictions.

This is the exact opposite of the way Jesus taught. Jesus did not teach as a mere academic exercise. He taught in order to impart truth. Of course, Jesus' nature gave him authority to teach. He is the Son of God. He is the Word of the Lord made flesh (John 1:1-3, 14). And this came out when he taught. When Jesus spoke of events in the Old Testament, he spoke as if he was actually there, because he was (e.g., John 8:58). He interpreted the Old Testament as if he actually wrote the thing, because, in a sense, he did. He says things like, "**You have heard that it was said ..., but I say to you**" (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44). And when he argues with the Sadducees, who denied that there is a bodily resurrection, he does not say, "I kindly disagree with you." He proves them wrong, and then he says, "**You are quite wrong**" (Mark 12:27). Jesus spoke with authority. He spoke as if his interpretation of Scripture was on the same level as Scripture. He spoke as if he was there when it was written. He spoke as if he, himself is the Word of the Lord in human flesh.

Now we all know that sometimes people speak with an authoritative tone, but they're just blowing hot air. If you want people to think you're smart, you get one of those tweed sport coats with elbow patches and speak in a British accent. If you want people to think you're strong, you wear a muscle shirt and speak in a deep voice. Most importantly, you learn to speak with confidence. And it may be that you speak with confidence because you know what you're talking about, and there's truth to it. Or it may be that you've learned to fake it. Sometimes a person can sound authoritative, but they're just blowing hot air.

So which is it with Jesus? Are his words hot air? Or do they actually have authority?

There happened to be a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit. That is, a demon, one of the angels who fell with Satan. And the unclean spirit says, “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” (1:24). But Jesus, apparently, does not want praise from the demons, so he rebuked the spirit and said, **“Be silent, and come out of him!”** (1:25). Now we’re about to see which it is. Is Jesus blowing hot air, or does he actually speak with the authority of the one who commands angels?

“The unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him” (1:26). This is a remarkable display of the power of Jesus’ words. He speaks, and physical reactions occur. It’s like at the creation, where God said, “Let there be ... and there was” (Gen. 1:3f). Jesus speaks, and the physical world obeys. And it’s not just the physical world we can see, but even the evil spirits are bound by the strength of Jesus’ words. The convulsions and cries of this man are a physical window into this struggle between Jesus’ words and the demon. The people there couldn’t visibly see the spirit, and they couldn’t visibly see Jesus’ words. But they see this man convulsing and screaming. It’s like Jesus’ words are ropes that captured and bound this demon. And it fights and screams as it is pulled out of this man against its will. It’s not like the demon hears Jesus’ words, thinks them over, and says to himself, “Well, I don’t really want to leave, but Jesus could really hurt me if I don’t, so I guess it’s in my best interest.” No. This is a matter of the demon’s will refusing to obey, but that refusal being completely irrelevant. Jesus’ words force him out.

It would be like if a parent tells a child to clean his room. And the kid says, “No.” But an unseen force compels his feet to walk over to his toys, and it compels his hands to pick up the toys and put them where they belong. That would be words with real power. That’s the kind of power Jesus’ words have. So it’s not merely that Jesus speaks authoritatively concerning what is or isn’t true. His words are not merely authoritative in *discerning* between what is true and what is false. But his words are powerful to *create* truth. Do you see the difference? He does not merely speak truth, but he speaks truth *into being*. This is real power.

This is the kind of power that ordinary humans only dream of. We would love to speak our desires into being. Sometimes we try. Or we’re actually encouraged to try. Whenever people talk about having their own truth, or being the only ones who can determine their truth, that’s what they’re doing. They’re acting like their words can create new truths. It’s really idolatry. We’re trying to be our own gods. We’re acting like our words have the power that only God’s words have. But God’s words have a unique power and authority.

What does Jesus do with this power and authority? Who does he use it to benefit? Remember, God instituted every authority for the good of those under authority. And God exercises his own authority to serve those under it. Jesus used his authority to free a demon-possessed man. That’s what he does. He came to set the captives free.

All of us are, by nature, in bondage. We may not be possessed by demons, like this man was. Or maybe we are. I think there is probably still demon possession today, but perhaps it manifests itself in a different way. But whether we are possessed like this man or not, we are all, by nature, in bondage to sin, death, and the power of the devil. And being in bondage means that we are incapable of freeing ourselves. Jesus came to set the captives free. That’s what he uses his authority to do. He tells Satan to flee, and he does. He declares to you, **“Your sins are forgiven”** (2:5), and it is so. On the Last Day he will say over your dead corpse, “Arise,” or something to that effect, and your dead body will obey. His words are forgiveness and life.

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This does not happen apart from the cross. If Jesus bypassed the cross and said, “Your sins are forgiven,” that would be unjust. God is not unjust. He does not speak anything into being that is not just. To do so would be contrary to his nature. So Jesus goes to the cross. He goes in human flesh to suffer and die. He bears the just punishment for all sin, so that he can justly declare to you, “Your sins are forgiven.” He truly uses his authority to serve you.

We crave God’s authority. We see injustice in the world. We see injustice in our lives. Sometimes we even see it within our own hearts. It’s always there, but we only sometimes see it. And we crave God’s authority over injustice. We long for him to set all things right. And, at the same time, we buck against it. God authoritatively calls out the injustice in our own hearts, but we don’t want to hear it, so we shut our ears and pretend to create our own reality, one where our hearts are just. But it’s just a fiction. We are living contradictions. We crave God’s authority, but we also seek to overthrow it.

But God is not a contradiction. Like a parent with a tantrumming child, he is faithful. He uses his authority to serve us. Jesus sees us in bondage to sin, death, and the power of the devil. So he takes our sin upon himself. He suffers and dies with it. He says to the devil, “You have no authority to accuse.” He says to you, “Your sins are forgiven.” And on the Last Day his authoritative and life-giving Word will call you out of your grave. You can count on this, because Jesus speaks with authority. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.