



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 28, 2024
DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20, 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13, PSALM 111, MARK 1:21-28

THE AUTHORITY OF LOVE



Mark 1:21-28 [*Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man 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 rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*]

My husband Will is a great lover of puns, some of which he cultivates for days and then offers unexpectedly. Earlier this week, we made a quick dinner after a long workday for both of us. He

made something easy – sauteed fish, cod actually, to go with green beans and a baked potato. As I held out our plates for him to add the fish, his face turned serious, he looked me in the eye, and

said, “True God from True God, Begotten, not made, . . .” ☺ It’s not the first time this has happened, but for me, it never gets old.

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, . . . God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.” Each Sunday, we say these words of the Nicene Creed, a lengthy yet cryptic statement of faith that the theologian Joan Chittister sums up as, “There is a God; Jesus is the Way; the Holy Spirit lives in each of us.”

This creed was developed in the 4th century when Emperor Constantine summoned all of the bishops of the church to Nicaea (now known as Iznik in modern-day Turkey) in order to reach agreement on some fine points of theology.

In particular, there was heated discussion around the nature of the relationship of God the Creator and Jesus of Nazareth. It was a bit of a philosophical problem. Was Jesus begotten of God, in which case he existed all along in Godself with no marked beginning? Or was Jesus created by God, and therefore came after God in time and substance? It was essentially about hierarchy. Are they equals or is Jesus subordinate to God?

The debates went on for months and in the end, the Council produced a statement close to the Nicene Creed we say each week. They settled on

a mystical sense of God and Jesus’ relationship that resonates with the opening of the Gospel of John, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God.”

The idea is that God the Creator and Christ are One, with Christ entering this world as Jesus, God’s incarnate child. Instead of a hierarchy, we have an intimate relationship. We continue to affirm each week that Jesus is “true God from true God, begotten not made,” even though our understanding of what this means in our 21st C context may differ from that of 4th C bishops.

The truth is, every age has grappled with understanding who Jesus was, who Christ is, and what that says about God and humanity. You may remember that Jesus himself asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Each of our spiritual journeys is about coming to know the Jesus of our own lives and the world around us. It is a lifelong formation.

And this has been the case from the first days of Jesus’ ministry, as our gospel today shows. After Jesus is baptized, retreats to the wilderness, and then returns to call the disciples, the first thing he does is teach in the synagogue and heal a man with an unclean spirit.

Think about the symbolism of that. Jesus’ first act after proclaiming that God’s kingdom has come near is to open scripture and teach it in a new way. And then he restores a man to full health on

the sabbath, when tradition would have forbidden it. It's notable that Mark doesn't say *what* Jesus teaches on this day. In Mark's gospel, Jesus makes few didactic speeches. Jesus' actions are his message.

The gospel tells us that when Jesus teaches in this new way, the in-crowd is astounded and immediately raises questions of his authority. They can tell he's got something that is true and compelling, but it's different from what the religious superiors say. This becomes a through-line in Mark's gospel – when Jesus does or says something new and life-giving, established leaders challenge his authority.

It begins with this first act of healing in the synagogue and continues to his last days in Jerusalem where he cleanses the temple and offers the second great commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Afraid of his growing influence, the chief priests and elders confront him again, asking, "Who gave you the authority to do and say these things?"

Authority is a tricky concept and has different meanings. The Greek word used in the gospel for "authority" is "*exousian*" and it can refer to power delegated from a supreme leader, mastery of a particular subject, or a unique expertise. This is the type of authority the scribes wield. As scholars who know religious law inside and out, their interpretations keep everyone on the right

side of the rules that shape their life, identity, and standing in community.

The word "*exousian*" is a complex word, though. It also means influence, moral standing, freedom to choose. So, it can point to an authority derived not through holding knowledge over or against another, but by drawing people close, building trust, and creating a community with shared values. That is the kind of authority Jesus has, and he uses it not to judge or control others, but to liberate them from the mental, spiritual, and physical bonds that prevent fulsome life.

These two types of authority can seem mutually exclusive, but they're not. Someone with delegated authority, who is firmly grounded in tradition, can express that authority by serving and strengthening the vulnerable. I think of leaders like Desmond Tutu or Pauli Murray, who use whatever cultural power they have to gather community, resist injustice, and build people up for the work of making way for God's kingdom.

They follow Jesus' example. Jesus didn't lecture or even answer questions about authority. He talked about love and acted in love. He fed the hungry, healed the sick, and restored women and men to life, even when the rules said it was wrong. When Jesus heals the man in today's gospel on the sabbath, he gives the law a new yardstick. Love. Love is the authority. And it is ours, too.

In inquirers' class two Sundays ago, we talked about sources of authority for interpreting scripture. We talked about the traditions of the church, past and present, and the lens of reason – scholarship, science, our conscience. These are all useful and must be considered.

But the bottom line in interpreting scripture (and our own lives, I believe) is Jesus' ethic of Love. Does this message point to loving God and loving our neighbor? Does it allow us to see every person, especially those who disrupt our sense of order or specialness, as beloved of God? Does it encourage us to continue Jesus' work of healing and reconciliation? If it does, then we hold it up. If not, we go back to the drawing board.

In the class, we also talked about coming to know the essential core of our faith. Why do I love God? Who is Jesus in my life? Why and how do I call myself a Christian? This is the heart of the spiritual journey, and because Love is the authority, every one of you, whether a cradle Episcopalian or a newcomer today, has the authority to name and claim your own faith. We don't do this in isolation, but in community. We allow the wisdom and love of others to help shape our understanding of God and our own callings.

For me, my current one-breath statement of faith is, "I follow the Holy One who calls me beloved child because when I open my heart to love as Jesus did, I choose a way of life that is the fullest,

most joyful, and most transformative of any I could imagine. It is pure freedom and possibility."

You -- the Saint Mark's community -- have your fingerprints all over these words. As our spiritual journeys have unfolded alongside each other and together, my faith has grown deeper and more courageous. With you, I have learned about resilience in painful times, the friendship of hope and grief, the holy art of showing up, and the proper way to light an altar candle.

Together, we have grappled with difficult scripture, reframed ancient images of God, and practiced noticing and acting on both our privilege and our blind spots. And so much more. I am deeply grateful for the gift of serving among you and bearing witness to your beautiful, faithful lives.

With Love, I offer this Celtic blessing:

The peace of God be with you,

The peace of Christ be with you,

The peace of the Spirit be with you,

Your children, and all you love --

To the day of the end of your lives,

Until the day of the end of your lives,

For an hour, for ever, for eternity.

Amen.