

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalms 111

Year B, 4th Sunday of Epiphany

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

February 1, 2009

Teaching as One with Authority

The idea is repeated twice with only a slight variation on the idea. The exorcism is proclaimed as is the teaching but there is something more to both of them. “He teaches as one with authority.” Jesus is viewed as powerful and in control. “A new teaching- and with authority!” We often focus on the dramatic scene of the exorcism. What does this passage mean? What did those who first saw and heard this message think of Jesus? What are we to make of a Savior who has “authority”?

Authority is a tricking word in the English language. We use it to refer to a wide variety of ideas that are intimately related with power, knowledge, and even strength. Authority can refer to someone with an ability or power to control others. This authority could be positional authority like a general who controls soldiers thanks to his rank or it could equally refer to a charismatic pied-piper type who leads and controls a community by virtue of her gifts more than anything else. Of course, we are also use the word to refer to someone with a great deal of information or knowledge. We have all heard it said that someone like Shelby Foote is an “authority” on the Civil War. Both of these ideas are being used when referring to Jesus in today’s gospel. In many ways we have two stories brought together with authority.

The first story is about Jesus’ information and knowledge authority. He teaches as one who knows what he is talking about. Now, before we allow the story to devalue the scribes, we should realize the depth of knowledge teachers in Judaism had. Rob Bell of the Nooma videos relates this far better than I but here is a brief overview of knowledge authority in ancient Judaism. To be a

rabbi, you had to memorize the entire Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible by the time you were 12 or 13. Every words committed to memory. Personally, I think Numbers would prevent me from proceeding in a ministry path in those days. In the next three years, a potential rabbi would have to commit the writings and prophets to memory as well. In Christian speak, we would have to memorize the entire Old Testament by the time we could drive! From there, potential rabbis or scribes would attach themselves to a school of rabbinical thought. Literally following around a teacher, they would learn the thousands of years of teaching and interpretation of different verses. As a result, many of those scribes when asked about a verse would say something like, “Well, Rabbi Moshe teaches that . . . and Rabbi Schlomo teaches again . . .” The idea was that interpretations were and are held in tension with one another. A verse could have over twenty different Rabbis commenting on it. You can see that today if you ever see a commentary on Torah. There will be one verse literally surrounded by a paragraph of interpretation. Around that paragraph will be another and another until the whole page is filled attempting to understand God’s message in that one or two lines of Torah! Jesus is heralded as knowing his stuff in a whole new way. The comment made about his teaching is that “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” (Mark 1:22) I think it is reasonable to say that Jesus did not feel a need to reference other rabbis or teachers or schools of rabbinic thought. He simply stood and proclaimed the meaning of the text in a way that spoke to people’s hearts. He had a special insight and knowledge of the text, a new authority. Of course, it helps when you have pretty much written the book!

Authority is sometimes difficult to grasp in its different meanings. An example may help. I worked for almost 8 years at the JCC- that is the Memphis Jewish Community Center. For every one of those years, I worked as

a lifeguard at their indoor and outdoor pools. I had positional authority sitting in a lifeguards chair and asking people to walk not run and stop holding each other underwater. People would listen because they understood my role in keeping the area relatively safe. I also had a level of knowledge authority. I earned a water-front lifeguarding certification through the Boy Scouts. The Red Cross Lifeguard course certainly covers the basics for a pool. The trick with the Boy Scouts is that most swimming areas were on lakes, streams and rivers. Therefore, we had to learn all sorts of rescues and situations. We had scenarios like: a boat just flipped over and people appear to be drowning, you have flips and pants on, how do you save them? The answer is leave the flip flops on shore and inflate your pants as a life-preserver. I am actually not kidding! So I had knowledge and positional authority as a lifeguard.

I had one other job at the JCC. I worked as a gymnastics coach. Now, I have no knowledge or ability as a gymnast. So, that side of authority was immediately out. I really only had the authority of position. I was a coach. My real job was to be the guy who stood by the various gym apparatus and catch whoever was falling. Now things went fine for a little while. I was a 17 year old guy whose job was to catch 11 and 12 year old, tiny little gymnast girls. As time went on, my job became more difficult. Girls who ordinarily never fell started falling three and four time during a routine- always towards my side. I was fired shortly thereafter for being too distracting to the girls. My 17 year old brain took it as a strange compliment. I had no authority with those girls or either kind!

Jesus uses his knowledge authority in those first verses and then quickly moves to power authority in the exorcism. The first person to fully recognize Jesus is the unclean spirit. He alones realizes that Jesus has a power and authority we are still trying to grasp. This idea is critical in the Gospel of Mark.

Jesus is not just another teacher or rabbi. He is someone with exceptional authority. Jesus is someone who is in charge not just of those around him but of everything in this world. He controls both the good and, perhaps more importantly, the evil. In the ancient world, anything and everything that went wrong was attributed to an evil spirit or force. For a nation like Israel struggling under the weight of occupation, evil was everywhere. From their position, the world was under siege by evil forces and it sure looked like they were winning. Chaos ruled where they prayed for order. Good was seldom seen while the sickness, starvation, oppression, and troubles of the world dominating.

We are not all that different today. In a world where there is every type of chaos from personal to moral to financial, we year for someone with enough authority to calm the seas and drive out the evil. We pray for someone who knows what is happening and can bring order out of chaos. If we are honest with ourselves, no one in this world has that authority. No political party, no government, no business, not church. Only one has the power of both knowledge and authority over the forces of this world. We gather to worship no one less. In an ironic twist, we can find comfort in the arms of one with such authority! We can feel safe knowing the one who has such authority. We can find peace under the wings of one with such authority! Jesus' fame spread because he revealed himself as one in control, as one with authority. We have all come to learn from him ever since.

Amen.