

“Modernity and the Crisis of Authority”

Mark 1:21-28

First Presbyterian Church of Greenlawn

The Rev. Frederick H. Woodward January 29, 2012

Mark 1:21-28 (NIV)

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are-- the Holy One of God!"

"Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching-- and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him." News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Modernity and the Crisis of Authority

There is a crisis of authority in the land and this morning I would like to take a little time to talk about how to recognize it, how it came about, and what to do about it. You get a glimpse of that crisis in the fact that the authority of those who conduct themselves in the public domain is so often called into question, whether they hold elected office or serve in the fields of law, science, education, or business. The authority of the church has also been challenged, of course, and along with it, the authority of the church's sacred text, the Bible. But it is not only the authority of faith that is under attack today, but also the authority of reason, tradition, and even experience.

Our crisis of authority did not begin over night. Although it was perhaps worsened in our land by such national events as the Viet Nam war and Watergate, our contemporary crisis of authority has roots in the modern era itself ("Modernity"), an era that was ushered in by the Enlightenment movement in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

For Western Europe and North America, the Enlightenment movement was indeed a watershed event. Prior to the Enlightenment, there was a basic trust in external authority, particularly the authority of the church, which exercised control even over the endeavors of science. But with the Enlightenment, all that began to change.

Modernity has brought us many blessings, but it has come with the heavy baggage of individualism. For in its distrust of authority, Modernity characteristically appeals to the freedom, responsibility, and reason of the individual. Modernity holds that the individual conscience is alone in a position to judge all rival claims to truth. In other words, Modernity's distrust of authority and its elevation of the individual go hand in hand. Both are rooted in the Enlightenment conception of the autonomous self, a self that is literally a law or *nomos* unto itself.

Over the last century, we in the West have seen the flags of autonomy and individualism hoisted higher and higher. Today not only is the individual considered to be the judge of truth, individual truth is held up above public truth, even or especially in matters of faith. You can see that not only in the rejection of so-called “organized religion,” but also and more recently in the new mantra, “spiritual, not religious.”

For those for whom such a distinction is as obvious as the air we breathe, spirituality has become an essentially private affair, having little to do nearly two thousand years of church history. And because we live in an increasingly pluralistic age, the Bible is often thought to be no more authoritative than any other sacred text, ancient or modern. Today, Americans are perhaps more likely to have a self-help book on their bedroom nightstands than a Bible, perhaps one written by an ex-minister or rabbi.

There is a crisis of authority in our land.

Our scripture lessons today are all about authority and I believe that their good news speaks to the bad news inherent in our contemporary crisis of authority. Our OT reading concerns God’s decision to authorize prophets to guide and guard Israel when it came into the land. The prophets received such authority so that the community of faith might retain its peculiar identity, and not fall prey to idolatry or be seduced by foreign gods.

Authority is also at the heart of our reading from Mark’s Gospel which describes Jesus’ first act of public ministry. As the scene opens, we find Jesus in Capernaum teaching in the synagogue. Although we are not told about the content of his teaching, we do learn of the people’s amazement because Jesus was teaching them “as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law” (Mark 1:22) (NIV).

Mark doesn’t tell us why their teaching lacked authority, and his remark is in a way puzzling because teachers of the law certainly did have an authorized role in the religious life of Judaism. Like modern day attorneys who argue case law, the teachers of law in Jesus’ time carefully supported their religious rulings by citing precedent. This was an accepted practice, and they were its accepted practitioners. So why does Mark say that they lacked authority?

Maybe because they did not speak in an idiom that the people understood. Maybe because they talked down to the people. Or maybe because the contrast between Jesus and the teachers of the law was simply too great. In comparison with Jesus, the teachers of the law may simply have lacked the sort of authority that Jesus exhibited. And if Jesus’ teaching had special authority and power, it was his was the sort of authority that came only from God, because God authored Jesus’ ministry and gave him authority to act in God’s name.

As we read along in the text this morning it may seem that Mark interrupts his own account of Jesus’ teaching authority with an unrelated exorcism story. But the exorcism story is really another story about Jesus’ authority. One indication of that is that Mark isn’t at all interested in the identity of the man possessed by the evil spirit. Mark never names him, and after the exorcism, we hear nothing further about him. The reason, I think, is that the real point of the story is not the man, but Jesus’ authority over the powers of evil, represented here by evil spirits.

Last week we read Jesus’ announcement that God’s kingdom had come near. The coming of God’s rule and reign was always associated with the expectation that the forces of evil would be stripped of their power. And that is precisely what Jesus’

exorcisms demonstrated. Like his healings in general, Jesus' exorcisms were signs that evil had indeed lost its hold over humanity; they were proof of God's power and triumph over evil in the world. And they were signs of Jesus' God-given authority in our own lives as well.

If true authority may be defined as the right to exercise power, our Scriptures testify that Jesus received that right from God. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus proved that it was and remains his prerogative to exercise God's power for the sake of life, and that includes a power over everything that opposes life or contradicts the sacredness of life as given by God. And that in turn offers us a clue as to how we as Christians might deal with our own contemporary crisis of authority.

How is it then that God helps us to address our own crisis of authority? Through Jesus Christ. For in Jesus Christ God has authored our lives. And because God has authored our lives, our lives increasingly take on the shape and character of God's handwriting on our hearts. And that means that our way forward in this age in which virtually all authority has been called into question is not to live as if we, as individuals, were the source of our own authority, but to live freely as persons under Christ's authority. And it means that our best way forward in an age when all authority has been questioned is to find our authorized parts in God's script for the world.

To help us in find our distinctive parts in God's story for the world, God has given us his authorizing Word. In the first instance, the Word which God gave us was Jesus Christ himself, the very Word of God to whom the scriptures testify. According to Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18).

But God not only gave us the living Word of God, Jesus himself, but also the written word of God, the Bible which, for Christians, is the indispensable witness to Jesus the Christ. The Bible is our script for living through the crisis of authority that affects nearly every facet of our contemporary lives.

So how does scripture, the word of God written, become authoritative for us as believers? Not, I think, by coercing our faith in Jesus as if Scripture were some external authority, because if coerced, it would no longer be faith. Besides, Scripture can only become authoritative for those of us who recognize that we are being authored by God in Jesus Christ, and claimed for life in his name. Scripture becomes authoritative for us as it becomes a source of empowerment, relating us to God and transforming our lives in the world. Scripture becomes authoritative for us as it authors new human identities and transforms individual and communal life. Scripture becomes authoritative for us through the inward and persuasive witness of the Holy Spirit, who scripts new life and new community in Christ's name.

But here's the deal. We can't go back; we can only go forward. It is neither possible nor desirable, I think, to try to address our contemporary crisis of authority by pretending that it does not exist. It is no longer possible for us to return to pre-modern times or to live within the world of the Bible. But faithfulness to God was never just about living in the world of the Bible, but about carefully bringing the message of the Bible into our own world.

But that means it won't do for us to try to adopt all of the ancient worldviews that we find in the Bible as if faithfulness to our Savior Jesus Christ consisted in that. Discipleship to Jesus Christ simply does not require that we believe in a three-story

universe in which there are the waters below, the earth above them, and water above the dome of heaven, a worldview prevalent in Scripture. Faithfulness to Jesus does not require us to believe in a literal six-day-creation or to insist, as did the Medieval church, that the earth is the center of the universe.

Although I might give offense, I would suggest that discipleship to Jesus Christ does not even demand of us that we must believe in demons. Or to put it somewhat differently, belief in demons is not among the essentials of our faith. But it is of the essence of faith that we believe in and faithfully follow Jesus Christ, Savior of the world. And it is of the essence of our faith that we confess him alone as Lord, which is to acknowledge that he has triumphed over all the evil that is both outside and inside us, whether we describe such evil in the language of demonology or pathology.

But if, in our fidelity to scripture, some of us remain convinced that a belief in demons must remain near the center of our faith, then, for God's sake, let us make sure that we don't believe in them too much, as if their power and authority somehow matched the power and authority of God. Yes, there is evil in the world and in us, and it goes by many names. But in Jesus Christ, God has won the victory over all evil. Battles and skirmishes obviously do remain, but in Jesus Christ God has won the war.

Given God's victory, we need not fear that our only way forward through our crisis of authority is to return to the conditions before the crisis occurred. That is the way backward, and we cannot get to God's future from there. Our way forward is simply to trust in the one who has real authority, and that One is Jesus Christ. Our way forward through our crisis of biblical authority is not, I think, through our insistence that the Bible is true and hence demands our trust, because that, I think, is to get it backwards. You see, I don't think the Bible has become authoritative to any of us because it is true; it is rather that we recognize the Bible's truth because it has become authoritative for us. We recognize the Bible's truth because it has begun by God's grace to author our own lives. And that means, I think, that in the context of our own crisis of authority, the truth of Scripture shall be self-evidently true only to those whom God has called and claimed as his own.

There is a crisis of authority in the land, and our way through the crisis is not to go backwards, but forwards in and with Jesus Christ, the source of all power and authority. We come to know Jesus in Scripture, the indispensable witness to who Jesus is and what he came to do. It is only in Jesus that we find a trustworthy answer to our crisis of authority, and that is because Jesus has become the author of our lives. And because he is, let all of us who believe in him let him continue to write God's story with us.

To God be the glory.