

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Mark 1:21-28

If you've ever spent any time around children or if you have memories of other kids from your own childhood, you know how important and how tricky the whole notion of authority can be. The minute a little one hits the atmosphere, he or she begins to figure out who's in charge. Babies are quite smart that way. It's a survival instinct. They can tell by the sight and the sound and the touch and even the smell who the people are who are going to take care of them. In most families, Mom and Dad have all the authority. If you happen to be the younger of one or more siblings, you know that the older ones have some authority, too. Mom and Dad gave it to them. They can tell you what to do. And if you don't, they can refer to the higher authority...which is Mom and Dad. Authority as it turns out is a very important thing to have as one makes one's way in the world. If you have authority, you not only can tell other people what to do, but you can make decisions about how things are going to go. You're the one in charge. You have the power to influence others in how things go.

Power is important...and it can be used or abused depending on who's wielding it. The gospel of Mark that we heard this morning establishes Jesus' authority right away. We're in the first chapter of Mark at the 21st verse and we're already hearing about Jesus' establishment of his own authority right at the beginning of his ministry. He has been baptized by John and he has won the 40-day battle with Satan in the wilderness and is now in Capernaum with the first four of his disciples. He walks into a synagogue and begins to teach. There is no mention of anyone with authority asking him to walk in and teach. And we have no idea what the local scribes and rabbis think about his usurping the spotlight and taking the floor. They must have been wondering, "Who in the world is this guy? And how does he have the right to take over in OUR synagogue?"

As Jesus speaks, the people are spellbound. This is not what they were expecting to hear. He speaks with authority...and we all know that tone. It's the tone people use when they have been empowered and when they know exactly what they are talking about. We all know the presence of gravitas when we see it or hear it. Jesus has gravitas. Jesus is different. Very different. People are drawn to him and they tend to pay attention to him...even if they aren't too fond of what he's saying. When he speaks, he speaks with authority. From our vantage point, we know exactly who gave Jesus this authority...this right to speak to people and explain to them how it is...or at least how it should be. We know who gave him the right...his Father did.

So far in this gospel of Mark, Jesus has done only three things before he shows up in the synagogue to teach. He has been baptized; he has spent 40 days and nights in the wilderness with Satan tempting him and he has chosen his first four disciples. This teaching in the synagogue is right at the beginning of his ministry. All through Jesus' ministry he will be challenged and so it is at the very start.

While he's speaking, a man with an unclean spirit cries out. That must have been quite the distraction. He speaks directly to Jesus and cries, "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." The implication here is that there is more than one evil spirit in possession of this man because the evil spirit refers to "us." And the interesting thing is, while the scribes and the rabbis are scratching their heads trying to figure out who this man from Nazareth is who speaks with such authority and gravitas that the evil spirits identify him right away. Those evil spirits know who he is. Their sovereign just spent 40 days in the wilderness struggling with Jesus...who triumphed over him. This encounter continues this struggle between the good forces of God in Jesus and the evil spirits of Satan who possessed this poor man. And Jesus wins again. But this time, Jesus isn't alone in the desert. This time the struggle and the triumph happen in front of a congregation in the synagogue. Now the secret is out. What an Epiphany!! This man, Jesus, is

more powerful than the evil spirits. He has the authority to command them to do something and they must obey. What would you be thinking if this scene had played out in our church before our very eyes?

Remember, this is the season of Epiphany. This season is not just about the revelations of the true nature of Jesus from stories of old in the Bible. This is the season that summons us to see the true nature of Jesus in the here and now. All of us have had experiences that transformed us. We have all had experiences that changed our way of thinking or that removed the scales from our eyes...and at last we saw clearly. We've seen times or know of times in the lives of others when something unbelievable and unexpected happened that couldn't be explained any other way than that it was a miracle. Those are moments when the power and authority of Jesus Christ is made clear to us...maybe for the first time. Those moments are present day epiphanies. And they happen regularly.

In our daily lives...right here and right now...we can see evil forces moving through the world and we may be feeling helpless to do anything about them. This wretched pandemic that we deal with on a daily basis may be wearing us down and eroding our confidence and our resolve, but we know who ultimately has sovereign power even over the pandemic. The struggle between the good forces of God and the evil forces of Satan through the pandemic are just as real as the struggle that Jesus had with Satan in the desert or as the exorcism of the evil spirits from the man in the synagogue.

Jesus came to show us that there was a better way for humans to live together than the way they were or the way we are now. He came to show us what real power is like. He came to teach us the ways God wanted us to deal with one another and the way God wanted us to use and show power. The study of how people deal with one another and how power is distributed is called the science of politics. There are actually courses taught in colleges and universities

that have the title Political Science. There are often admonitions to preachers not to preach politics from the pulpit, but I'm not sure I agree. Jesus came to teach us how to interact with one another and how to distribute power. Jesus is just about as political as you can get. If a preacher is going to preach the gospel they can't help but preach about politics.

What shouldn't be preached from the pulpit is anything that has to do with *partisan* politics. Jesus was not at all about partisanship. He didn't pit Pharisee against disciple. He taught them both. And he loved them both. But he did always side with the underdog...the one who didn't have the power or the social standing to make decisions or to tell others what they should do. Jesus was always seeking justice and equity for all people. Any preacher who tells us from the pulpit how we should vote in a secular election is abusing both the power and the privilege of the pulpit and is abdicating the responsibility of the pulpit. You can't preach what's partisan...one side over the other...but you can not teach or preach the gospel without teaching and preaching politics. Jesus made it very clear how he wanted us to interact with one another and how he wanted power to be distributed. Jesus was all about politics.

So if you are a Christian in 21st Century America...or anywhere else on the planet...you can't sit on the sidelines. That's not what Jesus modelled for us and that's not what he called his disciples or us to do. He gave us the rules. He showed us how they work. He modelled for us what kinds of decisions he wanted us to make. He invited us to be partners in building the kingdom of heaven. So we can't...as Christians...say, "Oh, I'm not involved in politics." If you know and understand what Jesus taught, you are obligated to be involved in politics...not necessarily within a particular political party, but with a set of values among people...a list of priorities and how you believe we should live with one another. If you are in a family; if you have a social circle of friend; if you live in a neighborhood; if you belong to a church; if work in an office...you are involved in politics...like it or not. Jesus shows us how to navigate all of that. You are obligated to help figure out where one person's freedom and liberty curtails another

person's freedom and liberty. It's not easy. Those...and many more...are all thorny issues that Jesus calls upon us to resolve in our own worlds.

Who gives us the right? Jesus gives us the right. And if you think you're not qualified, just look who Jesus called to be by his side in his ministry in this world...everyone from an uneducated fisherman to a tax collector to a Pharisee turned Christian...it takes all kinds and Jesus showed us that!

If you are a practicing Christian, look for the modern day revelations of who Jesus really is. Look for a 21st century Epiphany. It's not just about the Wise Men. An Epiphany may be more frequent and even closer than you think. Be prepared for the scales to fall from your eyes because when you do see it...you'll know it!

Thanks be to God. AMEN.