

“Tending the Field”

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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky

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“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” The first disciples, whom Jesus called away from their families and their livelihoods to become fishers of people, followed him into Capernaum, into a synagogue on the Sabbath day. This small group of young, newly homeless and unemployed men, entered into the center of religious life alongside any number of others. Being in the synagogue was not unusual, especially on the day of rest when all labor ceased and faithful Jews came together in their homes or in the synagogue to pray, to hear scripture read or recited, and to hear teachings and interpretations from the religious elders. Jesus going there to teach was not unusual either, as it was customary for Jewish men to take turns reading and interpreting scripture for the edification of the whole community. The teaching itself, although we do not hear many details about it, was not apparently particularly strange or outlandish, no one accused Jesus of being a heretic or a blasphemer on this day. No, nothing about this ordinary scene is unusual or even striking. Nothing, that is, except Jesus himself.

It is not the teaching that Jesus shared on this day that has been etched into hearts and onto pages across history to wind up in our Gospel book today. Jesus himself, the way he presented himself and the way that he spoke and taught, as one with authority, is what is remembered. It is the way that Jesus exists and operates in the world that is dangerous, risky, and miraculous. The way Jesus interprets the scriptures as if they belong to him and speak of him, the way Jesus teaches that the law and the prophets can be summed up in two great feats of love, is

what gets him noticed. The authority with which Jesus teaches is so palpable that even the demons lurking within the minds and hearts of those around him are drawn out to contradict him by name. The authority that Jesus holds is not a wielded authority, but an embodied one, and the evil forces which crave destruction and suffering cannot coexist with it.

There is a man in the synagogue, unnamed and robbed of his voice and his peace by an unclean spirit. The man has been suffering this affliction in silence, carrying within himself a state of impurity that he could not shake. In the presence of the authority of Jesus, the unclean spirit raises a cry of alarm, calling him by name and taunting him. As he will do many times, Jesus with a word silences the demon and orders it to leave his victim behind. The demon does not go quietly or gently, but it utters no more words of derision after being muzzled by Jesus's voice. This action, just like his teachings, elicits the same response- amazement at this man who seems to embody an authority that is altogether different from the scribes in the temple or the Roman soldiers in the streets. Jesus's authority is an authority that crosses the boundaries of the spiritual and corporeal worlds, an authority that draws followers and critics and even spirits to his presence.

The question of authority, what it is and who has it and why, has plagued humanity since our creation. Who has the authority to make decisions within romantic partnerships? Within parent-child or sibling relationships? Who is the head of a household, the head of a people, the head of a nation, and how do they acquire that authority? We face questions about the authority of scripture, the authority of scientists and researchers and organizations. In recent years the authority of media and how it shapes us has been called to our attention, as has the very definition of authority in a country built on the idea that authority means power and thus must not be too concentrated. When we imagine authority, we might imagine a firm parental figure, or

a supervising officer, or an elected official. We affiliate authority with the right to make decisions on behalf of others, the ability to exercise influence, and expectation of obedience. By very definition, authority is power, power to do something, power to make others do something, power to both make decisions and enforce action. The kind of power that we affiliate with authority does not often line up with the acts of power Jesus does throughout the Gospels. We would not expect one with authority to wind up naked and alone on a cross.

Jesus does exercise his authority in a way we would expect in the exchange with the spirit, exercising spiritual power over the demon in order to free the man. This act of ordering another to do something and expecting obedience is the kind of ultimate authority which we both crave for ourselves and fear becoming subject to by another. But notice that this impressive display of power is not what first shocks and impresses the congregation on this particular Sabbath day. Although the miracle of this moment is an exorcism, the authority that enables it was already on display in a much less likely place. Jesus, in his role of teacher, is immediately recognized by those present as one having authority, as someone different and important and worth paying attention to. In the familiar seated position of many teachers of the time, Jesus spoke to the gathered faithful, and they were astounded at his teaching. Not the content of the lesson, or the mystifying parable. His teaching, as one with authority, astounded them. Jesus taught, and continues to be our teacher, not as one with power over us, although this he has and plenty, but as one with an authority that comes from BEING the teaching. Jesus not only shows us the way, he IS the way. The author of salvation is our ultimate authority, even over our demons and our doubts and our disbelief. The same teacher who led fishermen to leave their nets and healed those who suffered and taught both women and men to be disciples continues to offer

us his teachings, his own life, for our learning. We are not called to rely on our own authority, but that of our teacher. I pray we continue each day to become better students.