



“WHOSE AUTHORITY?”
REV. BRADLEY L. DEHAVEN
ST. ANDREW’S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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Mark 1:21-28

This passage of scripture is rather significant for us this day. This is the fourth Sunday in the season of Epiphany, the season of revelation, the season God revealing God’s self to God’s people, to the world indeed. And on this day we see another incident in which Mark, in our Lectionary, Mark has presented Jesus as revealing himself to God, but not just to God, to everyone. And what we see in this wonderful story is a very interesting revelation because what is revealed isn’t revealed all at once to those who are listening but to others it is. Let me explain. Jesus and the disciples have traveled to Capernaum. They are waiting until the Sabbath, or they are there, and the Sabbath comes and they do, as is their custom, they go to church, all right. They went to the Synagogue on the Sabbath and Jesus, as is customary for most rabbis when a rabbi comes and visits a Synagogue, it’s customary for that visiting rabbi to offer a lesson to expound upon scripture to share with them a new teaching, the teaching from which they’ve come. It’s that teaching I want you to hear because that teaching is what is so astounding. We don’t know what he said, but we know that what he said was strong enough and different enough that, well, folks were astounded at it.

I went to a seminary in Denver, Colorado, a rather liberal seminary. Now you all have to know my background a little bit. I went to a very conservative undergraduate school for my bachelor’s degree. I finished at McMurry College, it’s now McMurry University in Abilene, a little Methodist school in Abilene, Texas. It is one of three church related schools in the city. You don’t think that city is in the middle of the Bible belt, I mean they got three Universities there and they are all church related. McMurry College, at the time, it’s now McMurry University, McMurry was a rather conservative school and I found myself there to be rather liberal. I didn’t know what that meant when I got there and was told or advised, if you will, to go to a different seminary than the one that most of my classmates were going to go to because I was in that religion track and everybody was going to go to seminary and be preachers. Most everybody that I knew in school at McMurry was going to go to Asbury, which is in Wilmore, Kentucky, a notably conservative seminary. My professor who was rather liberal also said you need to check this school out and gave me a brochure and I answered it. I went and phone called, wrote letters, the whole bit and low and behold was accepted without ever having seen the school or met anyone at the school. I graduated from McMurry College on a Sunday and by the following Friday I was loading up a U-Haul to move to Denver to Iliff to start summer classes, to get a jump on it. I found out in those five days that I went from being a rather liberal person at McMurry College to the most conservative person on campus at Iliff. I had no idea I could change that much in five days but what I learned in all that experience is that the school also teaches not just the stuff, but teaches the perspective and it’s from that that I have learned over the last 17, 18, 19 years of preaching that if I could hear a sermon from anyone Methodist, I really don’t want to go beyond that, I know Methodist schools. If I heard any Methodist preacher I could more or less with some degree of accuracy tell you where they went to school because of the school of thought and perspective in which they preach the gospel.

Please know that that is exactly what these folks were doing when Jesus showed up. When they said he teaches with authority and not as the scribes, they’re used to all the scribes, they’re used to what schools they went to because each scribe has that particular bent, if you will, on their own understanding of theology. They learned it and they are passing on what they’ve learned to the communities in which they served. Jesus comes along and his teachings didn’t follow anyone’s

familiar pattern and they were astonished, not that it was false, it was true, but it just didn't follow what everyone else had been teaching. The irony of this is that they were amazed at his authority. He knew what he was talking about.

We tried to discuss this a little bit at our Brown Bag Bible Study on Wednesday. We were talking about authority and we asked folks to try to define authority. It was interesting when we came up with that. Jan had a wonderful children's sermon and I want to ask you and this is okay to talk back to the preacher now. Who do you listen to? Your mother, nah parents have already been said. Who else do you listen to? Spouse, okay, and friends, children, preacher, sometimes, your boss, okay. What else do you listen to? Oh, we listen to the media don't we? What else do we listen to? Okay, to what our authors are saying. Boy didn't Oprah have fun this past week with that. How many people got hung up on that book and then hung up on the hung up on part? We listen to a lot of sources don't we? I would argue that we listen to some other sources, too, not just the media but specifically a kind of media and that is our advertising media, don't we? We listen to what kind of things we're supposed to buy, what kind of clothes we are supposed to wear, what kind of cars we're supposed to drive, we listen to the media because it does tell us and our authorities in the world are strong strange authorities.

I want to share with you another authority that really disturbs me. I read it yesterday, as a matter of fact, and it fits so well I wanted to bring it this morning. George Barna from the Barna Group is a notable research group in California, Ventura, California, had recently done a study. Now I want you to hear this. This is something that absolutely shocks me. They conducted a survey on how committed to God are Americans and the answer they say depends upon whom you ask. Two surveys were conducted by the Barna Group. They provide a glimpse into the contradictory views of church pastors and people in the pews. Findings suggest a huge gap between the perception of pastors and the reality of people's devotion to God. I want to share this with you. Based on interviews with a national sample of 627 protestant pastors this Barna study found that clerics, preachers, pastors, believed a large majority of their congregants deemed their faith in God to be the highest priority in their life. On average, pastors contended that 70 percent of the adults in their church consider their personal faith in God to transcend all other priorities; however, when the different sample was done of 1,002 adults only one out every seven placed God and their faith in God at the top of his or her priority list. Preachers thought you all were putting God first - 70 percent put God as number one. Here it says that one in seven put God in number one. The survey isolated those who attend protestant churches specifically and found that even among that segment of adults only 23 percent named their faith in God as their top priority in life. So what is the authority that you have?

Authority is the question here because this is something that was astounding when Jesus walked into that Synagogue on that Sabbath and began to teach and they began to listen to him. They were astounded at his authority, at his teachings. He had an authority behind his teachings that blew them away because it wasn't what they were used to hearing. But it didn't stop there. Mark goes on to say that there was a man possessed with an evil spirit who walked in and the irony of this is that they wanted to know who Jesus was but this guy who walked in knew him instantly. What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the Son of God. There's no doubt in his mind who this person is. It is an issue of identity, isn't it? The folks in the Synagogue had no idea who he was, but he had some kind of teachings that was astounding to them. It was different. It was new. It was astonishing, but when the man who had the evil spirit walked in, the evil spirit, not the man, but the evil spirit recognized him instantly and called him by name. How is it that evil spirits know who Jesus is and understand his teachings? How is it? Jesus rebuked the spirit and said be silent and come out of him. Now if that were in the twenty-first century dialogue,

Jesus would be saying, “You shut up and you come on out of him.” And with loud convulsing and loud crying the spirit, the unclean spirit, came out of him and again they were amazed. They kept on asking one another, “What is this, a new teaching but with authority!” A new teaching - with authority, what is this? I would argue with you that just below that question what is this a new teaching with authority is the real question at hand for all of those folks in that Synagogue, not what is this, but who is this.

Mark writes a Gospel that hinges in the middle on one particular question. The first eight chapters of his Gospel he builds up to this question and he answers it over and over and over and over and over and over again with every incident in which Jesus finds himself confronted with people who want to know who he is and with demons and spirits that know who he is and call him by name, Jesus asks his disciples in the middle of the book of Mark, he says, “Who do others say I am?” And then he asks the most important question, “Who do you say I am?” By the way that’s a plural you, who do you all say I am? When Jesus asks that question, you know who it is that answers, it’s Peter, but it’s really a question of who do you say Jesus is. Is he your authority or not and if he’s not, whose authority do you listen to?

I was in a Bible study several years ago in Georgia and listened to a professor. Her name was Grace Imathieu. She was from Africa, Africa University, and Grace asked the question as she told us about the wonderful scene that we are all familiar with, the scene in which God comes back to the Garden of Eden after they’ve eaten of the fruit, the forbidden fruit, and they said we hid from you because we heard the sound of you walking in the Garden and we were afraid because we were naked and God asked the most profound question. “Who told you that you were naked?” I want you to hear that question because what God is really asking is, “Who else have you been listening to besides me?”

Whose authority are you following? What’s your priority? What voice do you listen to most? What authority ranks highest in your life and how have you changed your life to fit that priority, that authority, that voice that guides you? How have you arranged your principals? How have you arranged your decision making? How have you become what God has called you to be if God is not the one that you listen to first? Whose authority do you have? Because I’m telling you the folks in this Synagogue, the authority they had was not necessarily God. They might argue with you about it, but the authority they really had was the law. That was their authority. That was what the scribes were teaching, they were teaching the law, God’s will according to the written word of Moses, the Torah, the first five books. If you follow these laws you’ll be what God wants you to be, so by all means put the law as your authority. And Jesus comes teaching a different authority. He doesn’t quote from his professors in seminary. He doesn’t quote from the commentaries on the scriptures, he quotes God because he knows God intimately and I tell you when you hear that word its amazing, it’s astounding, astonishing and it’s transforming. Whose authority do you listen to and what’s your priority? Whose voice are you listening to? If not God’s, whose?

Just to let you know, while I’m a fan of the New Revised Standard Version, I prefer it over most every other translation, occasionally they make a mistake, they do, and in that last verse there, there’s one mistake. I want to point it out so that you don’t have any confusion about it. The verse was very simple. “At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.” The word there that is incorrect is the word *famed*. Jan and I were talking about this, this morning. She was asking about what to do with her children’s time and I mentioned this and she said, famous or infamous, and I said well actually it was neither. You know infamy almost carries with it a connotation of negativity, that when you’re infamous you got a bad reputation, but when you’re famous you have a good reputation and in reality the word that was mistranslated here was *report* instead of fame, the report of what he had said and done spread throughout all of Galilee. And what

we've missed in that in this translation is the fact that it's still left up to the individual hearer to make that choice as to whether or not this is good news or not for you because it depends upon who your authority is. If God is your authority, this is good news. If it's not God, whom? So whose authority do you listen to? On whose authority do you base your decisions in your life? God wants to know. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!