

January 31, 2021
Mark 1:21-28

Epiphany 4
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“A New Teaching – with Authority!”

“They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority!’”

One of the greatest honours a pastor can receive is being asked to serve as a sponsor at a new pastor’s ordination. I have been given this honour five times during my ministry, three times more recently as I served as sponsor at the ordinations of Albert Romkema, Jason Ashby, and Jonah Bruce. While being an ordination sponsor does not require much spoken participation at the service, it gives the sponsor the privilege of standing with the ordinand as they affirm their commitment to preach and teach in accordance with Holy Scripture and the teachings of our church, and to place a hand on the ordinand’s shoulder as the bishop lays his hands on them and ordains them into the Office of Word and Sacrament. Serving as ordination sponsor to these pastors will always be one of the highlights of my years as a pastor in the Church of Jesus Christ.

Having a front-row seat at these ordination services always reminds me of my own ordination and the ministry that was entrusted to me when I was set apart to serve as a pastor. I am reminded of the promises I made on that hot June evening ever time I place my stole around my shoulders, which is both the symbol of the pastoral office in which I serve and a physical reminder that whatever authority I have in this office is not mine but is authority that has been placed in my care by the church which is the Body of Christ, the assembly of all believers that lives and serves in obedience to Jesus’ command to “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matthew 28:19). The authority to preach and teach in the name of Jesus Christ is not a personal possession for me to do as I please; it has been placed in my care by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who declared to his disciples that “*all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*” (Matthew 28:18). An ordained minister – and all who are called to serve by virtue of their baptism – must understand and live in accordance with the distinction between having authority and being entrusted with authority. This distinction can be seen in today’s Gospel lesson, in which Jesus is presented as one whose authority is not given to him by another; rather, Jesus is the one *with* authority because he is, as the voice at his baptism declared, “*my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*” (Mark 1:11). Jesus’s authority is recognized by those

who hear his teaching as he enters the synagogue in Capernaum: *“They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”* (1:22). Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue brings him into conflict with the scribes, who were experts in interpreting the Torah. Scribes were associated with the local Pharisees during Jesus’ Galilean ministry (*“When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’”* – 2:16) and in their work with the religious officials in Jerusalem during Jesus’ Passion (*“It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him”* – 14:1). The scribes and Pharisees, whose authority is bestowed upon them by others, are disturbed by the challenge that Jesus’ teaching and activity pose to their traditions and status within the faith community; they will even go so far as to issue a false accusation that Jesus *“has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”* (3:22).

- *“The contrast between Jesus’ teaching and the scribes is that the scribes taught with eradication, but Jesus with authority. Jesus interprets the Scripture as one who has the right to say what it means. His teaching has no need for external support, whether from Scripture or elsewhere; his world is self-authenticating, not like that of the scribes.”* – Lamar Williamson, Jr.

Instead of continuing with an example of Jesus’ teaching, Mark uses an exorcism story to demonstrate the authority of Jesus’ word. Exorcism stories generally include an encounter between the afflicted person and the exorcist, the action by the exorcist, and the demon’s departure. Demons take over the personality of their victim and attempt to resist the exorcist’s efforts to expel them. Jesus would later entrust this authority to his disciples when *“he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits”* (Mark 6:7). The demon that Jesus encounters in the synagogue in Capernaum is more perceptive than the human audience, acknowledging Jesus’ status and the fact that his coming marks the end of their demonic domination over human beings: *“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.”* (1:24). The title “Holy One of God” is related to the identity given to Elisha in 2 Kings: *“Look, I am sure that this man who regularly passes our way is a holy man of God”* (2 Kings 4:9). Some of seen this connection as meaning that Jesus, like Elisha, *“would restore the correct boundary between the demonic realm of death and the world of life created by God”* (Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler). While the crowds might have been amazed at the demon’s declaration, Jesus is unimpressed: *“But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent and come out of him!’”* (1:25). The end

of demonic power is a sign that the present evil age is coming to an end (*“You powerful kings who dwell upon the dry ground will be obliged to watch my Chosen One sit down on the throne of My Glory, and judge, in the Name of the Lord of Spirit, Azazel and all his associates and all his hosts.”* – 1 Enoch 55:4).

- “The order to come out of him has eschatological connotations; if the time has been fulfilled and the domain of God has come near, that means that God’s enemies are beginning to be defeated, and that Satan’s rule over the world is about to end.” – Osvaldo Vena.

Satan’s power is being broken up because the Lord has come to redeem his people. Therefore, the exorcism indicates what it means for the kingdom of God to draw near (*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”* – 1:15). The Kingdom of God cannot be separated from the person of Jesus who embodies God’s power (*“He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death.”* – Small Catechism). The unclean spirit is the antithesis of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus possesses. The swift, violent reaction of the demons to Jesus’ command (*“And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.”* – 1:26) proves the truth that Jesus is the “Holy One of God.”

The reaction of the crowd is again one of amazement: *“They were all amazed, and they kept asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’”* (1:27). “Authority” (*exousia*) denotes the absolute possibility of action that is proper to God alone as the source of all power and legality (*“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”* – Acts 1:7). God’s authority may be seen in the sphere of nature (*“After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendour”* – Revelation 18:1) and in the authority of God’s Word which God’s people recognize as *“a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”* (Psalm 119:105). In relation to Christ’s person and work, authority denotes the divinely given right and power to act along with the related freedom; it is power recognized at the Transfiguration when the voice from the cloud declares *“this is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!”* (9:7) and in the crowd’s response to the Sermon on the Mount: *“the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes”* (Matthew 7:28-29). Jesus’ power and authority are inseparable from the imminence of the kingdom;

with the presence of him who exercises this authority, the kingdom of God draws near.

- “Christ is the king of righteousness and life against the devil, sin, death, and all evil conscience. He has given us his holy Word, that it may be preached, in order that we might believe in him and live holy lives. Therefore we must pray that this may become effective and powerful, that the Word may go out into the world with power, that many may come into this kingdom and learn to believe and thus become partakers of redemption from death, sin, and hell.” – Martin Luther, Sermons on the Catechism, 1528.

The authority that Jesus possesses at the “Holy One of God,” the Word “*that became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14) is the authority that Christ has entrusted to his Church, which is “*the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel*” (Augsburg Confession). Our Risen Lord commissions his apostles to be witnesses to the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, declaring that “*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my disciples in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Jesus entrusts his authority to the church that now identifies itself as “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9).

For Luther, a clear distinction is made between the authority of Christ and the authority that Christ entrusts to the Church; there is no unconditional authority in the church parallel to and apart from the Word of God: “*The church believes and thinks nothing except what Christ has taught and commanded, much less something contrary to what he taught and commanded.*” All authority in the church – ordained and lay, synodical and congregational – is a trust that our Lord has bestowed upon his people, and therefore authority that must always be exercised to serve the one who possesses this authority, the one who used his divine authority “*not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*” (10:45).

- “Therefore, let us firmly maintain that no Christian authority is valid when exercised contrary to Christ. St. Paul says, ‘We can do nothing against Christ, but only for Christ’ (2 Corinthians 13:8) ... Therefore, we must hold to God’s Word with firm faith.” – Luther, An Appeal to the Ruling Class, 1520.

Jesus' display of authority made such an impression upon the Galileans who witnessed it that *"at once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee"* (1:28). But the amazement that leads to this news spreading throughout the region does not mean that the people understand who Jesus is or that they believe in him. Therefore, Jesus would often caution his followers not to tell anyone who he is, as when Peter responds to his question *"but who do you say that I am?"* by proclaiming that *"you are the Messiah."* (8:29). Instead of praising Peter (as Matthew reports), Jesus *"sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him"* (8:30). The disciples and all who witness Jesus' teaching and miracles do not yet understand that suffering lies at the heart of Jesus' mission, and that *"they are no more able to use the titles 'Messiah' and 'Son of God' correctly than the demons do."* (PHEME PERKINS). The contrast between Jesus' divine authority and human authority is manifested in his suffering and death on the cross, not in using his authority for his own purposes or to dominate and exploit others:

- "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." – Philippians 2:5-11.

Those who are entrusted with Christ's authority to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ must use this authority in the way Christ intends. Church authority is a trust for which we are responsible; none of us can speak of the faith community as "my church" or "our church" because it is first and foremost *"Christ's Church."* One congregation in New Jersey has gone so far as to place "The Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church" on its masthead on top of the names of its clergy and lay leaders, a sign that the ultimate authority in the Church is our Crucified and Risen Lord, and that all who have this authority placed upon their shoulders are accountable to the Lord of the Church for the way in which they are faithful – or unfaithful – servants of the Word and the authority to preach and teach in the Lord's name.

- "The Apostle means that each individual Christian shall become the servant of another in accordance with the example of Christ ... Paul's meaning is that when each person had forgotten himself and emptied himself of God's gifts,

he should conduct himself as if his neighbor's weakness, sin, and foolishness were his very own. He should not boast or get puffed up. Nor should he despise or triumph over his neighbor as if he were his god or equal to God ... It is in this way, then, that one takes the form of a servant, and that command of the Apostle in Galatians 5:13 is fulfilled: 'Through love be servants of one another.'" – Luther, Two Kinds of Righteousness, 1519.

A highlight of each ordination service where I have been a sponsor is when the bishop places the stole on the newly ordained pastor's shoulders "*as a sign of your work, and live in obedience to the Lord Jesus, serving his people and remembering his promise: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'* (Matthew 11:28-30)." (ELW Ordination Service). Every time I place the stole over my shoulders and I prepare to preach and lead worship, I am reminded that the first person to put it on my shoulders was my bishop, and that the authority that I exercise as a pastor is not mine but is a trust bestowed on my by the Church that has been called by Christ to continue his work of proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God, the authority to "*bring good news to the poor ... proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*" (Luke 4:18-19). Our authority as God's Church is a call to obedience, a call to use the authority entrusted to us by the one with authority to fulfill the will of the Lord of the Church, "*who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*" (1 Timothy 2:4). May we use our authority in the name of the one with authority, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who frees us from sin, death, and the power of the devil so that we might live and serve as God's holy people, sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.

Amen.