

Deut 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Mark 1:21-28, Psalm 111

In the gospel reading today, we hear about Jesus and his followers going to the synagogue in Capernaum on the sabbath. Mark says, "they were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Can you imagine, a strange rabbi and a few followers (I get the impression that there were about four people following him at this point), show up at the synagogue and he is talking like HE wrote the Torah. And then he is recognized and he calls out an unclean spirit. Again, a new teaching-- with authority. You could kind of understand if the people in the synagogue were asking, "Who are you?". I wonder if the people who heard him and saw what he did asked themselves, "Is this somebody that we should be following, too?"

In this scripture, Christ's authority is revealed. In week's to come we will hear more about Jesus's authority and how people are drawn to him, how they follow him. And it feels like it was simpler then, even though I know that it wasn't. History and the gospels let us know that there were lots of rabbis and healers and insurrectionists wandering the landscape, calling on people to follow them, and only one was Jesus.

And after all these years, we face much the same dilemma. There are a lot of people in the world proclaiming God's message and encouraging you to follow them, and while most of them identify as Christian, they rarely sing in harmony. How do we know who to listen to? Now I am a person who, admittedly, has been wearing a t-shirt that says "Question Authority" for most of my life. But it feels like some of the typical messages we hear, like "If you want to know what I think, read the Bible, that's what I believe", have become the religious equivalent of one of those inflatable air dancers that flops around outside a carwash. There is a lot of movement and there's a lot of air, but nothing much is really happening.

So what are we to do? We face the challenge of following the right authority and the challenge of using our own authority, our own power, rightly.

When Jesus spoke to the Jews in synagogue at Capernaum, we don't know what he said or what he read, but we do know what he did. He healed a man. While as a former mental health therapist, I don't really know what to think about the gospel's identification of what I would see as mental health issues with unclean spirits~ but I do know that there is more in heaven and earth than I have dreamt, and I know that unclean spirits still haunt many, many people today. We may know these unclean spirits by different names-- mental illness, addiction, violence, anger, hatred, but we are no more free of them than we were 2000 years ago. We still seek healing, we still look to the one with real authority. We still seek compassionate, loving action.

In the epistle today, St. Paul speaks about our authority and how we use it...

I'd like to mention some background to the issue of "food sacrificed for idols". At the time that Paul was writing to the Corinthians, Corinth was a good sized city and there were a number of temples sacrificing to different gods. These temples, depending on their size and influence, might be doing a major sacrifice of cattle or sheep or other meat animal on a daily, or weekly or seasonal schedule. The interesting thing is that when the temple made a sacrifice, "a burnt offering", their protocol was to construct a neat package of all the parts of the animal that people don't usually eat-- so the hide, the bones, some fat.... and that was what was placed and burnt on the altar. The rest of the animal was cooked and shared with the temple staff and anyone else who was present. So showing up at a temple for a sacrifice had a lot in common with attending a barbecue. And considering that meat was expensive and it was likely that many of the people in the Corinthian church would rarely otherwise get meat, this issue of whether or not to go and eat meat at the temple could be critical to a person's wellbeing.

And Paul acknowledges that. He says, "we know that no idol in the world really exists" and that there is no God but one. So eating free barbecue is well within a person's own authority. In this reading the word for power or authority, (exousia) (ex-soose-ce'-a) has been translated as liberty. But it is the same word (ex-soose-ce'-a) that was used to describe Jesus' authority in the synagogue.

But Paul also points out that not everyone works from the same place of knowledge. Not everyone gets this. There are some who would not understand and would be harmed by seeing Christians eating meat in a temple and he notes that Love trumps Knowledge every time. Paul writes, "Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." Paul uses his authority to create and support loving community.

So where are we? The scriptures lay out our challenge, the challenge of following the right authority, the challenge of using our own power, our own authority rightly.

Jesus declared God's reign, an authority that turns the conventional world upside down. He took action. He healed the man in the synagogue.....

Paul carried out Jesus' message to build a church. That meant people setting aside their own thoughts and needs, taking compassionate loving action to become the body of Christ on earth.

We are still faced with a world full of unclean spirits- illness, addiction, violence, slavery, and that sense of helplessness and overwhelm in the face of it all. But we can choose to follow Christ's authority and Paul's convictions of love to turn the world around and to find our own beloved place in it.

Amen.