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February 1, 2009  
Mark 1:21-28

Take Thou Authority

Jesus walks into the synagogue and begins to teach, and all who are there are amazed because he teaches as one who has authority. Moments later he encounters a man, possessed by a demon, and the demon cries out, “Have you come to destroy us?” It is a moment of confrontation between Jesus of Nazareth, the Spirit possessed Son of God, and the demon possessed man in need of healing. Jesus, in whom the fullness of the kingdom of God is found, comes face to face with the demonic powers that hold this man in their grasp.

One of the many great things about being at a place like Duke is that there is no lack of authority. Person after person on this campus is at the top of his or her field, the leading authority of the day in one subject or another, from constitutional law to the fingernails of lamas to the latest and best of economic theory. And it’s not only the faculty and staff who carry authority, students carry all kinds of authority, the academic authority of being a valedictorian or the social authority of being a member of one community or another or president of this group or the other. There seems to be a deep yearning among many of us to be an authority in something. I’m one of the millions of people on Facebook, which has become a kind of authority in the lives of many. For those of you who aren’t hip to Facebook, it’s this social networking site where one has a public profile where you let the world know who you are, and then you can connect with other people, join affinity groups, post pictures, and update people on what you are doing at any given moment of the day. I get messages on a regular basis saying things like, “Ronnie would like to be your friend. Would you like to be Ronnie’s friend?” I have hundreds of Facebook friends, a good percentage of them I don’t even know. For anyone under the age of 35, Facebook is the authority on social relationships and information. People find authority in all kinds of places, in parents and friends, in blogs, in degrees, in money and CNN and FOX news.

When I was ordained at Lake Junaluska up in the North Carolina mountains, I played a role in a long tradition of passing on authority. I knelt on stage, a stole representing the authority of the priestly office and the yoke of Christ was put around my shoulders, and three senior leaders of the United Methodist church, a couple of bishops and another pastor, all put their hands on my head. Take thou authority, one of the bishops said, to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, to serve and order the life of the church. One of the bishops, I think, was particularly concerned about me, and so he pressed down with all his weight — I tried to rise up, he pushed me back down — it was as if the weight of the whole church leaning down on top of me, the succession of bishops from every generation, one after another, all the way back to the apostles”, saying take thou authority. It was a powerful moment, and there was an authority of church teaching and tradition, a responsibility to be a steward of the faith and God’s people that
was given at that moment. But that’s not where church authority began for me. It began in a little Methodist Church on the campus of Oberlin College in rural Ohio where I was baptized into the Body of Christ as an infant, the authority of the kingdom of God given to me in that moment.

The twin themes of Jesus’ identity and Jesus’ authority run through the gospel of Mark like a two-lane road rolling across the North Carolina piedmont. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus is given an identity at the Jordan Rivers as God’s beloved child and then he is given the authority to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom.

The third theme in the early part of Mark’s gospel is what Jesus does with his authority and identity, and that theme comes from the first words that Jesus utters in the New Testament, perhaps his earliest recorded words, they come from Mark 1:14, only a few verses before our lesson from today. It is Jesus’ first sermon, and it’s quite short, which you all might appreciate, he says: “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news.” The third theme is kingdom. Jesus has come has a herald of the kingdom of God.

Every Sunday morning when we gather for worship, we remind ourselves in liturgy, song, and word of these three things. Our identity is found in being one of God’s beloved children, and our authority comes not from the degrees hanging from our walls, or the titles beside our names, or what you are majoring in or doing after graduation, or our retirement accounts, or how many friends we have on Facebook, or whether or not we are in good spirits or bad, whether life is running along smoothly or the going is rough, our identity comes from being called into Christ’s body, and we are given authority as those who are to bear witness to the good news of the kingdom of God breaking into our midst.

The heavy irony in the text it is that the demon inside the possessed man is the only character that really knows what is going on in the story. The scribes are bewildered and the disciples are silent, but the demon not only recognizes the authority that Jesus brings, but also identifies him and names what the kingdom of God is all about. “I know who you are,” says the demon. “You are the holy one of God. Have you come to destroy us?” The kingdom has come near, and the demon senses his time is short.

Demons figure prominently in the brief gospel of Mark. There are 13 healing stories in the gospel, and in this healing story along with six of the others, Jesus is casting out demons. Most mainstream Christians get a bit nervous when demons enter the picture because we don’t know quite what to do with them. Demons tend to be thought of in four different ways in Christian circles. The first camp reads the word “demon” and immediately substitutes “psychological disorder.” In other words, there was nothing afflicting the possessed man in the Synagogue that couldn’t be cured by a few long hours on the analysts’ couch, or by coming to terms with his childhood, or by finding the right drug to rebalance his brain chemicals. In this sense Jesus becomes like a divine doctor Phil, the demon is in your head and Jesus is the therapy. The second camp tends to see demons in the gospels as a metaphor for social injustice. The man was possessed by the
system, and Jesus is the liberator who has come to set him free, to overcome all the places the powers and principalities are corrupt and inaugurate God’s reign of justice and peace. The third camp tends to say that “demon” is a code word for personal sin. The man is possessed by something he has done or is doing, and thus he is held captive by his own actions and Jesus has come to forgive him so that he may walk into the future with hope. The fourth camp sees the demon as the embodiment of evil, evil as an external force with a mind and purpose of its own. Jesus is cast as the embodiment of all that is good, and through his death and resurrection, defeats the forces of evil. It’s not hard to recognize each of these four themes in the church today, and all four of them are true to one extent or another. For his part, Mark does not want to split hairs. Mark is clear: The good news of the gospel is that nothing, to use the words of St. Paul, neither life nor death, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers or principalities can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. In him the kingdom of God has come near, and God will ultimately triumph over all of these things.

I went on a Chapel mission trip to Honduras a few years ago. Those with authority on trips to Honduras are the students who work construction during the summer, or know how to speak Spanish, or are skilled with a soccer ball. We lived in a little community called “Ojo de Agua,” or eye of water, and it was way up in the mountains, with not much water in sight. Each night after digging foundations and laying concrete for a series of little cinderblock houses, we’d gather with our new friends, sometimes to eat, sometimes to sing and play, and one night to read the bible together. The priest in the community read one of these healing stories from Mark’s gospel, a story about one demon or another shrinking in the presence of Jesus. One of our students spoke up, saying she wasn’t sure she believed in demons, and was quite sure she hadn’t seen one herself. One of the older women in the community, barefoot and rugged after years of hard labor, started talking; the priest translated. The woman said to the student, “I’ve seen plenty of demons, one of them took my husband from me a few years ago, another keeps infecting our water which makes us sick, and our government seems to be full of demons because all they seem to want to do is fight.” When you have as many demons as we have, we need Jesus to cast them out.

This is only the beginning of Mark’s gospel. Five chapters later, after Jesus has performed the bulk of his miracles, his healings and casting out demons, he will turn to his disciples, this community that he has been gathering around him while wandering the Galilean country-side, and he gives his authority to them, saying, “You’ve seen how it’s done. Now go, go out into the world two by two, it’s up to you now, you have the authority to proclaim the good news of God’s kingdom, you have authority to cast out demons and heal the sick.” Jesus puts the authority of God’s kingdom in their hands.

The authority of the kingdom of God is not in Jesus alone, but in us, his people, his church. It’s why Meister Eckhart says that all of us are walking around as little Christs, little Christs, everywhere. And that authority comes not from what is, but from what we know will be, not from present circumstances but from certain hope. Authority not from a degree, or an expertise, or our social network, but from our place in the body of Christ, sent by the Spirit as salt and light of the Good news of the Kingdom of God.
that is all around us, to confront the demons of this world in whatever form they present themselves, to enter into the places of sickness and grief, to make peace with friend and enemy, to love our neighbors far and near, to speak a word of hope to the brokenhearted. This is the authority that God has placed in your hands and my hands.

If that task feels a bit large, and you feel a little small, if all that is wrong and out of place in God’s good world, in the hurting of those you know and love, in the ache at the center of your own heart feels just a bit overwhelming. Not to worry, it doesn’t have to happen all at once. In fact it comes in the smallest and most unexpected ways. Stretch out your hands, in bread and wine, the kingdom is there, the authority of Jesus, the authority of the kingdom is in your hands.

Amen.