



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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With Authority
4th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 1, 2015

Mark 1:21-28

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘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.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

“He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Mark’s gospel established the authority of Jesus in the first chapter. He told his readers that this man, Jesus, was believable. They could trust what he said. Indeed, Jesus was not like the others. “He taught with authority and not as the scribes.” Mark underscored this by describing the reaction of the people. His listeners “were astounded” when he taught. They “were amazed” when he healed the man possessed of a demon. Astounded and amazed!

This “authority” was the reason Jesus became known throughout the ancient world. He was a small town rabbi in the fishing community of Capernaum. He was far away from the center of Jewish religious and social life, (in Jerusalem). But we read, “his fame began to spread,” because he taught them as one having authority.

This morning I want to look at the concept of moral authority and its importance to both churches and individual Christians. First, I will look at the “crisis of authority” that our post-modern world is experiencing. Second, I will compare our age to the first century. As different as our age is, we have some amazing commonalities with the world in which Jesus lived. I will conclude with the challenge to rediscover the authority of Christ today.

I

We are experiencing a crisis of moral authority. There is a loss of faith in social institutions. This distrust or loss of faith is pervasive:

- Government
- Academia
- Science
- Medicine
- Economic structures
- The media
- Social structures
- And, yes, the church!

Today is Super-Bowl Sunday. It is the biggest television audience in America! But even the Super-Bowl is tainted with suspicion and distrust. What are the two biggest stories of the week? “Inflate-gate” and the commissioner’s loss of integrity and control.

The crisis of our age was summed up by a young teenager who said to me, “I just don’t know who or what to believe anymore.” Many feel as though we are living through W.B. Yeats’ prophetic poem, when he wrote, *“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold..”*

This is also the crisis for the church. If you “google” *church/loss/moral authority*, you will find over five million articles dealing with the church’s loss of moral authority. But you don’t have to read the articles. We can see it. We are shrinking. The great cathedrals of Europe are empty. Our own “Crystal Cathedral” was sold because less than 300 people were attending. Churches across the country are closing. Pastors and laity are burning out because they buy into the myth that if we keep doing what we are doing, but work harder and longer, it will turn around. But once again, I think this is a crisis of authority. It is not that people don’t want to believe... No... People are hungry for a believable faith, but they no longer respect the institutional church. We are experiencing a crisis of moral authority.

II

There is very little our age has in common with the first century. We live with computers, smart phones, twitter, email, Facebook, cable tv, and WiFi.... We can travel half way around the globe in less than a day. But we do share something: a vacuum of moral authority. The world in Jesus’ day was in a cultural ferment. Judaism was struggling with its own identity. There were four movements in the Judaism that Jesus experienced.

1. The *Sadducees*: this group was pragmatic and believed that they would survive and if they cooperated with Rome.
2. The *Pharisees* were devout Jews who believed that authority for living could be found in God’s law. They studied it rigorously, and tried to obey every “jot and tittle.”
3. The *Zealots* were revolutionary and advocated violence against their oppressors.
4. The *Essenes* were the “hippies” of the day, living communally in the desert, believing that the “Messiah” would appear there.

Each group had its solutions to the challenges of the day. They had their teachers who would debate in the synagogues. Mark used the term “scribes” to identify these teachers. But none of these teachers could claim the heart of the people. They lacked authority.

But people responded to Jesus, (a backwater, peasant, rabbi), with amazement. They were astounded by him? Why? Because he had what the others didn't... he taught with authority. What was the foundation of his authority?

- a. **Self-knowledge.** Jesus knew who he was. He wrestled with the temptations that try and control each and every one of us before he began his ministry, (Matt 4:1-11) In that struggle, his true self emerged. He was the Son of God.
- b. **Humility.** Jesus never claimed authority. He did not seize it. No! He was humble and his authority was rooted in his humility.
- c. **Service.** He healed people. His actions were consistent with his message. Jesus not only taught his followers to serve others, he himself was a servant-Messiah, indeed a "man for others."
- d. **Gracious sacrificial love.** Jesus challenged people but always out of love for them. He looked at the rich young man "and loved him" and then told him to sell what he had and give to the poor, (Mark 10:17-22) The woman at the well, who had five husbands and was living with one who was not her husband was offered water; living water, (John 4:7-26). Jesus practiced forgiving grace: On the cross, he cried, "Father forgive them," (Luke 23:34). The love that Jesus embodied did not manifest itself in judgment, but rather gracious acceptance.

Christ's authority as a teacher was not merely in his words... it was embodied in his actions, his entire person.

How did the people respond? "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

III

The Apostle Paul tells us we "are the body of Christ," (I Cor. 12:27). We should be amazing and astonishing! Are we? Do we possess the moral authority of Jesus? I fear that when we speak, fewer and fewer listen. Even though we have access to amazing instruments of communication, yet we are not communicating. Let me ask, "Why should the world believe us?"

- How can we preach a message of peace to the world when we are caught up in our own internal fights and discord?
- How can we preach love when we fail to embody it in our own actions?
- How can we preach grace when we act so judgmentally?
- How can we preach hope, when we appear so hopeless?

Mahatma Gandhi once told a missionary who was struggling, "If you would only come in the spirit of your master, Jesus, you would be irresistible." I fear that we have been resistible. The contemporary church needs to embody the moral authority of Christ if it is to have any message for this world.

This authority is not claimed or taken... it is given.

But first:

1. **We need to know who we are.** We need to spend wilderness time, wrestling with our own temptations, our own history. This is the struggle for integrity. It is the call to confess our sinfulness as individuals and as an institution.
2. **We need to put on the clothing of humility.** The authority of Christ is not something that we can seize or control. Pope Francis has all the authority of the Vatican, but he has something that his predecessors did not have. His humility, manifest in service, is a more powerful entity than his miter. It speaks with more authority than any doctrine of papal infallibility.
3. **We need to be a servant people and a servant church.** Christ himself said that if we want to be in his presence, if we want to have a relationship with him, we should seek out the poor, the hungry, the homeless, indeed, "the least of these my brothers and sisters". We need to serve others, as Christ served.

4. **We need to embody a love that is gracious, life affirming, and forgiving.** We pray, “Forgive us our sins, in the same way that we forgive others.” Do we forgive others? Do we welcome the prodigals home?

I believe that the church, the Body of Christ today, needs to master the tools of our modern age to communicate our message to the world. But we need to do it with the moral authority of Christ. We need to have a message to give, and we need to embody in our common life together. We need to embody Christ’s love as we interact with others. In the words of John Greenleaf Whittier, we are called to:

*Follow with reverent steps the great example
Of Him whose holy work was doing good;
So shall the wide earth seem our Father’s temple,
Each loving life a psalm of gratitude.*

“If you would only come in the spirit of your master, Jesus. You would be irresistible.” The challenge for us, Poland Presbyterian Church is to go out into the world in the spirit of our master. Irresistible! Amazing! and Astonishing! Amen.