

FIRST LESSON: Psalm 111: 1-10  
SECOND LESSON: Mark 1:21-28  
January 31, 2021

***“Genuine Authority”***  
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings includes a very interesting little story about authority. Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. As night fell everyone was on watch on the lead battleship, including the captain, because the visibility was poor with patchy fog.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing reported, “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.”

“Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain called out.

The lookout replied, “Steady, Captain,” which meant they were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, “Signal that ship: ‘We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees.’”

Back came the signal, “Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees.”

The captain said, “Send: ‘I’m a captain, change course twenty degrees.’”

“I’m a seaman second-class,” came the reply. “You had better change course twenty degrees.”

By that time the captain was furious. He spat out, “Send: ‘I’m a battleship. Change course twenty degrees.’”

Back came the flashing light, “I’m a lighthouse. Your call.”

The battleship changed course. There’s authority based on human status, and there’s authority based on reality.

Capernaum was abandoned in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and only exists as ruins today, but at the time of Jesus, it was a large and prosperous village. The fact that Jesus was permitted to teach in the local synagogue was not at all unusual. The president of the synagogue was basically an administrator. Local rabbis and scribes did the preaching, teaching and leading in prayer. In a small community like this they probably welcomed a new voice. Jesus’ teaching style proved to be a huge departure from what they were used to, however. Most scribes and rabbis taught in a rather tedious way, much like reading a research paper out loud with lots of footnotes. They might cite who interpreted a scripture one way and who interpreted it another way. They might pull together a group of scriptures with a similar theme. They would debate the minutiae of each detail. Those scribes who had legal expertise would come to conclusions based on precedent. But then came Jesus, who cited no one. He read the scripture, and then proclaimed its meaning. He didn’t deliberate. He declared. And this was really not done. Who did this guy think he was? But the people instinctively recognized his authority. Jesus taught in a way that was

free of traditional restrictions. There was no “and, but, if, when.” Sometimes he even said things no one had said before, and he wasn’t apologetic about it. He was clear and confident.

If Jesus’ authority in teaching was striking, it was about to be backed up. A man possessed by an impure spirit was in the congregation, and he initiated an exchange between himself and Jesus. But he used an idiom, so it’s difficult for us to translate. Literally the man said, “What to us and to you?” Jesus actually used a version of this with his mother when she asked him to help take care of the wine crisis at the wedding at Cana. He said, “What to me and to you?” (John 2:4). It seems to be a way of pushing back. By his very presence in the synagogue Jesus had apparently crossed a boundary with this man, or rather with the impure spirit. One of them had to go. Today’s idiomatic slang might go something like, “Yo Jesus, what gives? This is my turf!” Of course, our English translators opted for the much less colorful, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Things escalated quickly, however, because the spirit went on to say, “Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

Jesus didn’t open up his pocket “how to do an exorcism” manual. He didn’t perform any elaborate rituals. He basically just commanded the spirit to be quiet and come out. It was not even remotely a fair fight. The spirit had no choice. The man shook violently and the impure spirit left with a shriek. As a story it’s pretty straightforward. But it leaves us from the 21<sup>st</sup> century in America feeling rather uncomfortable, because most of us don’t speak the language of demon possession. Psychoses, drug addiction, post-traumatic stress, depression, dementia, autism, even conspiracy theory induced rage—we have a lot of ways to describe problematic conditions, but demon possession isn’t one of them. It’s not found in the DSM, the diagnostic manual for mental illnesses. Medical doctors and psychiatrists don’t learn about it. In fact, if a medical doctor or psychiatrist even recognized it as a condition, they could possibly be sanctioned for being a quack.

We’re left with few options. Either there was a literal impure spirit inhabiting the man, or he suffered from a psychiatric condition that Jesus healed in a way that was culturally understood. I am willing to accept that when it comes to spiritual evil, we don’t know all there is to know. Even the language of demon possession is not as hard and fast as some might think. Literally verse 23 says he is “a man IN an unclean spirit”, as if the man himself were immersed in some unclean form of evil. Most Jewish literature of the time focused on demonic attack rather than demonic possession. And regardless of what we are talking about, the head-spinning Exorcist version is definitely not it. But human evil and spiritual evil are real, and when the two combine like they did in the Third Reich, the result is devastating.

Jesus did not actually destroy the spiritual entity in this story. He denied it a home. He kicked it out so it did not have a foothold to work from. We have no idea what happened from there, but we do know from other scripture that a vacuum must be filled. The man would have to actively turn away from evil at that point and seek God in order to be protected. We invite evil in. If it is evicted, we then need to fill the room and lock the doors. The only way to truly

get rid of a bad thing is to replace it with a good thing. Jesus had the authority to evict. The man would have the responsibility to fill the void.

In every encounter we find in scripture between Jesus and unclean spirits there are a few consistent elements. First, he commands silence. He muzzles the evil. While it appears in this case that the impure spirit was just declaring Jesus' true identity, nothing is ever that straightforward. Evil always distorts and lies, and once lies are out they take on a destructive life of their own. The devil is called the father of lies. We have seen the truth of that in our nation with the impact of what has come to be known as "the big lie," the lie that Donald Trump won the election. Attributed to Mark Twain, although no one actually knows where it originated, is the astute comment that, "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is still lacing up its boots." Human nature is dangerously credulous. Second, without fanfare, Jesus simply evicts the forces of spiritual evil. He doesn't placate. He doesn't give it time or room to operate. He kicks it out. Jesus has zero tolerance for evil.

Medical science will help us deal with the deadly pandemic we are in the midst of. It is to be hoped that common sense, skill and the right investment on the part of the government will get the vaccine distributed to all of the American people. The FBI and Homeland Security may be able to track down domestic terrorists in our midst and stop them. But when we find ourselves up against spiritual evil only the authority of Christ will do. **And it is an authority that Jesus has given us.** Human evil on its own is powerful enough to bring mayhem and ruin. We may not be in a position in society where we can stop it. But we can cut it off at the knees by severing the ability of spiritual evil to assist and empower, and we do this through prayer. The least politically significant little old lady in the country can move mountains by praying effectively.

If you feel as helpless as I often do watching events unfold all around us, it may help to remember that in terms of the world, Jesus did not have any power at all. He wasn't a king. He wasn't a politician. He wasn't rich. He didn't have connections in the business world. He wasn't a military leader. He wasn't even a priest or a scribe. And yet he exercised the authority of God. He spoke God's word. He lived God's way. He moved through the world completely unintimidated by those who did hold worldly power. As God's servant he ceded his authority to no one. And he used his authority not to gain power or riches, but to serve and save humanity. Jesus' authority was genuine authority. His teaching from the scriptures was direct and powerful. And his authority extended into the spiritual and physical realms. Jesus healed people, stilled a storm and walked on water. And he evicted spiritual evil, denying it a base from which to operate. This is the authority that we as the body of Christ are called to continue to exercise. Do not be afraid to confront evil in prayer. We don't have to understand it to recognize and resist it. It is Jesus who has the authority, and Jesus who continues to work in and through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Psalm 111: 1-10

<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord

I will extol the Lord with all my heart  
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

<sup>2</sup> Great are the works of the Lord;  
they are pondered by all who delight in them.

<sup>3</sup> Glorious and majestic are his deeds,  
and his righteousness endures forever.

<sup>4</sup> He has caused his wonders to be remembered;  
the Lord is gracious and compassionate.

<sup>5</sup> He provides food for those who fear him;  
he remembers his covenant forever.

<sup>6</sup> He has shown his people the power of his works,  
giving them the lands of other nations.

<sup>7</sup> The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.

<sup>8</sup> They are established for ever and ever,  
enacted in faithfulness and uprightness.

<sup>9</sup> He provided redemption for his people;  
he ordained his covenant forever—  
holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.  
To him belongs eternal praise.

Mark 1:21-28

<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. <sup>22</sup> The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. <sup>23</sup> Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, <sup>24</sup> “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

<sup>25</sup> “Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!”<sup>26</sup> The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

<sup>27</sup> The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.” <sup>28</sup> News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.