

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20
I Corinthians 8: 1-13
Mark 1: 21-28

Accountability and Authority
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For many, or most careers, there is a pretty clear process or a system of proving oneself skilled enough to do the work. For instance, to become an expert sommelier, or wine steward, you train, and take a course, and are tested. You can see people who are doing this at the top level in the documentary, *Somm*, and boy, do those students know a lot about wine! They all seem like expert authorities on the subject. But competition is fierce, and few receive the red and gold lapel pin that marks them as the best of the best.

Today's passage from the Hebrew Scriptures speaks of prophets, not sommeliers. But the credential question comes up. It is assumed that the people of Israel will need a prophet, because words from the Lord are so strong and overwhelmingly fiery that few people can handle that direct power. But a prophet will come (or probably, multiple prophets) who will speak for God. The prophet will speak words that hold people accountable. And the prophet him or herself will be accountable to God to speak the truth. Accountability and authority are all bound up together.

There is no doubt that early Christians, including the gospel writers (and perhaps Jesus himself) turned to their ancient Scriptures as they tried to describe the new and distinctive ministry that Jesus embodied. Especially in Mark's Gospel, and most clearly in today's reading, authoritative teaching is bound up with authoritative healing. The people of Capernaum were as astounded by the teaching as by the exorcism, and saw them as linked.

Now, the first thing 21st century people wrestle with here is the whole idea of demonic possession. You have surely heard modern explanations of what was really going on: maybe it was some kind of seizures, or mental illness. Because today, who speaks with authority on the issue of demonic possession? Most of us don't even want to go there.

As homiletics professor Fred Craddock says, the place to start with our passage from the Gospel of Mark is not to announce that we no longer believe in demons, since "not believing in demons has hardly eradicated evil in our world." Instead, we have to "locate and identify the forms and strategies of evil equivalent to first-century demons."

So, let's think. People in ancient times seemed to believe that evil spirits were more powerful than ordinary human beings, but not as powerful as God. So Jesus, after giving some astounding Bible study, proves that he possesses some of that Godly power. Rather than trying to rationalize the ancient understanding of spirits or demons, we might recognize the helplessness that people felt when something seemed to chain them up, or keep them from living in community, or made them despicable. We might be able to say that we are not as powerful as we'd like to be over the forces that keep us from living as children of God. Jesus steps into that helpless, enslaved world with public, authoritative confrontation, at the very start of his ministry. And he does this with no obvious credentials, no apparent history, no status: it comes as a bit of a shock.

But Mark means to be shocking, and to link the authority of teaching to the confrontation with evil. And he wants to make it clear from the start there is no doubt about who will win these confrontations, ultimately. The spirit within the afflicted man, or we might say, the chains that bind him, cry aloud to protest the very presence of Jesus, and to name him for who he is, “the holy one of God.” Jesus barely wastes a whole sentence on this spirit: “Shut up, and come out of him!” With those few words, the people in the synagogue realize that bold teaching and power over oppression come together. They can’t stop talking about it.

Right at the start, in chapter one, Mark is signaling Jesus’ mission: he will oppose any force that keeps us from our full humanity, and from knowing the full love of God and the full life God offers. Jesus will exercise power over any evil power that disrupts or corrupts life. He will cross any boundary to do it, cross even the boundary of the spirit world, cross over to meet *us* whenever we are kept from full community. Mark is signaling that Jesus is going to reveal God in a new way: God as the one who can and will overcome all the boundaries we put into place, and break all the chains and cages we build. Jesus’ authority to do this is demonstrated time and time again. Each and every boundary they tried to put in place, they thought was in place, even those which they thought of as absolutes, God burst through. And this was, and continues to be, life-changing. Whether it be social, religious, political ethical, racial, sexual, gendered, even – if we read to the end of the Gospel, the final boundary of death – God confronts evil and bursts through.

And we know that Jesus was held accountable for his peculiar demonstrations of authority. He was confrontational, but embodied a wisdom and integrity that was compelling. He kept on amazing and astounding people as he confronted each power within them and within their unjust systems. He kept on using his authority, not for self-aggrandizement, but to give us some tools for living. And this is good news, very good news. It makes us think about what we do with our power and our authority, such as it is.

Unfortunately, groups of people have a way of getting snarled up in controversy, even when they hear the Good News and want to live the good news. Human nature. Ever been to a public meeting in Norwich? ☺ From the very beginning, those little church communities that read the Gospel of Mark wanted to hear the voice of authority speak to their particular issues. This is why we have the letters of Paul, often writing to help people sort out how to live in this new kingdom, now that Jesus had changed everything.

The newly founded church in Corinth, Greece struggled with a religious dilemma, a religious controversy. They were committed to following Christ, but they lived in the world of Caesar. If you went in to the market place of Corinth you could buy meat for the evening meal, just as we would go to Dan & Whit’s or the Coop or Hannaford’s today. But in Corinth, the butcher also worked for the local Roman or Greek temple. All butchering had religious meaning...and it was always pagan, not Christian. So here was the question: is it an insult to Christ to buy or consume meat that had been sacrificed to Zeus? Or, since Zeus didn’t really exist, was the sacrifice meaningless, and was it just another source of protein? Was *this* the time to confront the spirits of evil? With this question hanging over their heads, you can just imagine what the pot luck dinners in Corinth were like, with little yellow sticky notes...”this casserole contains meat sacrificed to the emperor.” “This casserole is sacrifice-free.”

We may not always like Paul’s advice, but he says something quite profound here. He says that personally, for him, sacrifice to gods was meaningless, so that eating meat from the

marketplace had no religious meaning, good or bad. Left to his own devices, he would happily eat it. But more important to him than his own opinion was the potential anxiety and fracturing of the group. He reminds his readers that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Even though the idea that an idol can affect the food somehow seems foolish to him, he does not want to make room for anyone to go worshipping in the old ways again. So, he adapts. In a way, he gives up the authority of superior understanding in favor of group solidarity. He is truly displaying his pastoral credentials.

Here is where each religious community has work to do: discerning which matters are areas of resistance and struggle - which arenas are the site of healing and fulfillment - and which things are to be given up, offered up as a sign of Christian love? Do we use the power we have for good, and is the love that we preach a truthful one, even if that truth is painful to hear? Are we held accountable by Scripture to whatever gifts of power we have to follow in the confrontational, boundary-breaking footsteps of Jesus? These are difficult questions, and churches and denominations have been splitting apart for years because there is always some point beyond which we cannot move. Each generation faces this discernment question.

Now, I could be facetious at this point and talk about our little difficulties: red hymnal or black hymnal, changing the carpet color or layout, deciding how to manage the rental of our facilities. Don't get me wrong: these have been deal-breakers for people in the past, and they have walked out the door rather than compromise. People have claimed to be experts, authorities, well-credentialed in the question at hand. But we all know that we are called to higher matters than these: questions like how to offer prayer and care for those who need the touch of love, or about the means of protecting the earth's land and water through international agreement, or limiting access to guns in the hopes of protecting school children, or our compassionate treatment of refugees and immigrants, or our welcome and affirmation of our gay, lesbian, and trans brothers and sisters and children. My prayer is that we can speak with love, and with the authority of love, to all these questions. My prayer is that deeper knowledge will build us up, not puff us up. We all have the credentials, as baptized children of God, to do this holy work.

Deep within each person, in addition to those strivings and imperfections that make us jostle for positions of authority, that make us ask for proofs of authority, is a desire for wholeness and healing. Deep within each community, in addition to the pride and knowledge that give us a sense of identity, is a desire for wholeness and healing. Jesus has shown us a way. Through the grace of a boundary-breaking God, we are given a path forward, offering each other, and all those we meet, words and actions that build up community. Let's walk that path together.

I close with a prayer by Walter Wink:

God, help me
to refuse ever to accept evil.
By your Spirit, empower me
to work for change
precisely where and how you call me.
And free me, from thinking
I have to do everything. Amen