

4TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (B)

Mark 1:21b-28
January 29, 2012

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I expect we have all said it, and that it has also been said *to* us by an angry parent, a perturbed school teacher, a miffed neighbor, and perhaps even a judge! — “*You better listen to me!*”

It’s an authoritative “pay attention” statement that lets us know that whoever is saying it means business! And so it should be no surprise to us that in our life in Christ, we are expected to *listen*. God himself wants us to listen, and he means business!

So, in today’s First Reading from Deuteronomy, the Lord God says of his prophet, “*him you shall heed,*” and again, “*Whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.*” So it’s quite clear. Our God says: “**Listen up!**” And likewise he adds the sober warning to a prophet who presumes to say “*God says...*” when in fact that is not God’s message. The Lord declares “*that same prophet shall die.*” God takes his Word — its authority and integrity — seriously. Such stern words should leave no doubt in our minds then, about the order of business when we gather together on the Lord’s Day. Luther tells us in the Small Catechism that “*We are to fear and love God so that we do not neglect his Word and the preaching of it, but regard it as holy, and gladly hear and learn it.*”

There is a rural Lutheran church building in Nebraska of German heritage. Above the Gothic arches doorframe that leads into the nave, are words stenciled in German script: “*Enter that you may listen!*” Good advice for us who believe that the Lord God reveals himself to us in his Word proclaimed and the Sacraments administered. God *speaks*, in order to communicate with us. And on our part, we are called to regard this Word as holy, and gladly hear and learn it.

And so, in today’s Gospel, the Lord Jesus is identified as “*one who had authority*” while teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum. And this authority was recognized by both people and demons. St. Mark says of the congregation in the synagogue: “*They were astonished at his teaching...And they were all amazed.*” And the response of the demon, or “unclean spirit?” “*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.’*” The unclean spirit has the right confession, similar to Peter’s “*You are the Christ.*” What the demonic and human responses to Jesus’ authority have in common, is that they both see something *authoritative* and *authentic*.

“*Jesus taught them as one who had **authority**.*” There is nothing to indicate, that Jesus was angry or authoritarian in his speaking, but he certainly meant business! As a faithful adult Jew, Jesus took advantage of his right to teach.

But his teaching authority wasn't recognized simply on the basis of what he said. There was more — something else — that made His words authoritative. They were accompanied by intentional action — the deliverance of a man with an unclean spirit.

Jesus' teaching authority was both heard and seen — it was audible and visible. Our Lord taught and spoke with integrity. His words produced action. His Word effected what he said, what he proclaimed. Just as God said "*Let there be light*" in the creation, and light occurred, even so, the Lord Jesus speaks and things happen.

But we need to be clear about just what it is that happens, for some Christians confuse authority with authoritarianism. They are drawn to words that tell them what to do, words that give them hell-fire and damnation. Other Christians confuse authority with success. If a church grows numerically and has the crowds, the dollars, and the buildings, well then they see it as sure evidence of the authority of God in action.

But consider God's authority revealed in Jesus Christ. This is not a human authority, to be sure! And it is also not an authority that the world always values or recognizes. Even many religious people have problems with it, because Jesus' authority is always heard and seen in order to *reconcile sinful people*, to the one true God. Jesus' authority is always heard and seen, in order to bring broken people home — home to the God who loves them — whether it's a crazed, demon-possessed person — as in the Gospel — or fearful and sin-weary, baptized people — like you and me.

Jesus' authority is seen and heard in the *humble giving of himself for others*. Jesus' authority is seen and heard in the pouring out of his life-blood on the cross.

Many people recognize that authority is a contentious issue in the church today. American Christians are concerned about authority, and are usually a bit ambivalent about it. On the one hand, we don't want anyone telling us what to do — "*Who made you the boss of me?*" But on the other hand, like the people of Capernaum, we crave an *authentic* and *authoritative* Word from God! Deep down, we want the truth. We hunger for it.

One thing is certain: wherever authority is vested, whether in a bishop or a pastor, or a Church Council: if and when such authority uses force or coercion, it is *not* the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because Jesus' authority is heard and seen in ways that benefit the other. Jesus' authority is employed in words and actions that bring deliverance from sin. Jesus' authority is employed in words and actions that help us grow in a life with God that is made manifest in our relationships with the neighbor. The authority of Christ that drives all his actions, is *self-giving love*. A love that sometimes hurts — and takes the hurt — in order to heal.

To be sure, Jesus has the authority of God's Law behind his words. What

Christ says about sin, is what God says about sin. Jesus is the prophet foretold by Moses, and God declares: “*Whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.*”

Should we determine not to listen to Jesus and so act as if “no one’s going to tell me what to do,” then Jesus evidently has no authority. He will not be seen, heard or received in repentance and faith.

But, where Jesus is heard, he will also be seen in action! Action that is seen in what he does about sin in the very act of giving himself over to suffering and death to serve us, and to save us. For it is **from the cross** that the authority Jesus wields defeats sin, destroys death, and restores life with God.

So let us know for certain that Jesus’ words and actions are the final authority both for our sin, and in the church. For the authority of the Son is ultimately heard and seen, not in a power that forces, not in the signs of worldly success, but rather in **self-giving, self-emptying love** that does something for the neighbor in need.

Just as Jesus speaks and does something for you this morning. By his speaking — by his Word — your sins are exposed and then forgiven! Jesus washes you clean, so that you might be raised up by his life.

Jesus gives himself in bread and wine — his true Body and Blood, given and shed **for you**, that you might **be his Body** in the world — giving yourself to others, as he first gave himself for you.

Blessed authority! When and where it happens, Jesus is at work in the world and Church — audibly and in action! For your forgiveness — for your life and salvation, to the glory of God!

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

