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 Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

“By Whose Authority?”

Let’s be candid right from the get-go: Don’t we all cringe a bit when we hear exorcism stories like this? To our modern ears, they seem arcane and implausible. We may even blush—our Lord and Savior, the one whom we trust and follow, conversing with the demonic world in the middle of a worship service! We’d much rather focus on the teachings of Jesus: his profound parables, his demanding lessons on prayer and love of neighbor and the inclusion of outcasts.

The problem with this tendency, however, is that exorcisms and healing stories are too prominent in the ministry of Jesus to sweep them under the rug. In Mark’s gospel alone, there are eighteen healing stories, several of which are exorcisms. On just about every page, Jesus is restoring sight to someone who is blind or cleansing someone who is deemed impure or commanding a demon to stop ruining the life of a young child. Whether we like it or not, these wild and crazy accounts are there and integral to Jesus’ ministry, inscribed in our Scriptures for our puzzlement and edification.

Of course, cleaning up the record of Jesus to be more palatable to the modern world has been tried many times before and usually found wanting. One of the most famous examples is that of Thomas Jefferson who took a razor to his copy of the canonical gospels, cutting out all the supernatural aspects contained therein. What emerged was the Jefferson Bible, a pared down, supposedly more acceptable account of Jesus of Nazareth.

The Scripture reading we just heard from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, complicates this Jeffersonian tendency. We may prefer Jesus’ teachings to his healings, but in this story, Jesus’ teaching and healing are inseparable, natural and supernatural elements are fused together in the untidiness of the life of faith.

Jesus and his recently recruited followers travel to Capernaum, a small fishing village on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. After settling in and finding lodging, as a matter of course they attend the local synagogue on their first Sabbath in town. During the service, Jesus seizes the opportunity to teach the gathered faithful, a right given to all adult Jewish males. He walks to the front of the space and begins preaching.

Mark provides no detail about the content of Jesus’ words. Instead, he emphasizes the overwhelming response of the congregation. As he puts it, “They were astounded at [Jesus’] teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

Then, just as Jesus is wrapping up his humdinger of a sermon, a man involuntarily pops up from his pew and cries 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 congregation, once

astounded, is now scared out of its wits. They had been drawn in by the cadence of Jesus' voice and now this disturbed man is spewing verbal abuse at the top of his lungs. But Jesus is unfazed by the interruption. He realizes that this man has been invaded by an "unclean spirit." He realizes this man is a victim of oppression, dominated by something or someone he can't handle on his own. He realizes this man, despite his combative words, is actually screaming for help, pleading for deliverance.

So Jesus wastes no time. He liberates the possessed man with a word, rebuking the "unclean spirit" that has poisoned his heart and mind. This man, perhaps well-known in Capernaum for his antics, for his orneriness, for his unseemly appearance, was now standing before them as calm and happy and healed as could be. This man, whom parents kept their children away from and local authorities kept a close watch over, was now delivered from his troubles.

During coffee hour after the service, the congregation is buzzing with amazement. "Can you believe it?" they whisper to each other. "We have never seen anything like this before. This newcomer from Nazareth is offering us a new teaching—a teaching with authority! He doesn't just blather on and on, stringing together pretty words about God's love and salvation and peace. He actually enacts it. Right here in our midst!" Not surprisingly, Mark tells us, word quickly spreads about Jesus to the neighboring towns and cities of Galilee. His fame is growing by the day.

This short passage is quite an opening act to Jesus' ministry. There is teaching. There is confrontation. There is healing. There is amazement. There is sharing of the good news. But, beyond all of that, I believe this opening act of Jesus' ministry raises the theological issue of authority.

Who are our authorities? And why do we give authority to them? Whom do we trust to really tell us the truth?

We give authority to our doctors, our barbers and our tax preparers. We give authority to the newspapers and magazines and blogs we choose to read, the politicians we vote for, the cable news channels we watch. We give authority to our family and friends who care for us and speak truth into our lives. We give authority to the companies we work for, the books we read and the associations we belong to. We give authority to our banks and credit card companies and 401(k) plans.

We give authority to all of them because we believe they are trustworthy, or at least trustworthier than the alternatives. And because we know we can't be an adequate authority in all things. We are finite and must rely on other people and other institutions.

This fairly obvious insight struck me again a few months ago when Arianne and I packed up our belongings in Chicago and moved to Fort Wayne. In this brand-new community, we needed to find a doctor, a dentist, a bank, a hair stylist, a place to live, an auto mechanic—and the list goes on. Who would our new authorities be? Whom would we trust to tell us the truth?

In the church, the knee-jerk answer to this question of authority is easy: our ultimate authority comes from the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Christ embodied this authority in his earthly ministry, as he taught and healed and ushered in the kingdom of God. But the startling truth is that Christ passed on that authority to his disciples, including you and me. What do we do with this authority we've been given? How is this authority mediated on the ground in our life together?

Thankfully, we Presbyterians have inherited a clear-cut polity that helps us delineate how we govern ourselves. We believe in representative authority, in shared power and responsibility. We do not give all the authority to one person, nor do we give everyone equal authority. Instead, we elect and ordain Elders from among us to serve particular terms, people whom we believe to be trustworthy, and we charge them to make decisions, to wield authority, on our behalf. We call this council of currently serving Elders the Session.

Above the Session and the local church is the Presbytery, a local governing body made up of dozens of churches. Above the Presbytery is the Synod, a much larger regional governing body covering the area of a few states. And our largest governing body is the General Assembly, comprising the national church. No matter the size or authority of the governing body, however, it is always to be placed under the ultimate authority of Christ, the Head of the Church.

Now, I don't mean to bore you with the ins and outs of our Presbyterian polity. I know it's not the most scintillating of topics, but perhaps I'm in the mood to talk about these days because of the new member class I've been teaching. As we've been discussing what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be Presbyterian and—just this morning—what it means to be a member of First Presbyterian Church, this question of authority has come up more than once.

Yes, when these good and talented folks join our church, they will voluntarily put themselves under the authority of our Session, but they will also recommit themselves to steward the authority we've all received as disciples of Christ:

They and we have received authority, have been empowered to:

- Proclaim the good news of Christ's love in word and deed
- Take part in the common life and worship of our congregation
- Lift one another up in prayer, mutual concern and active support
- Study Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life
- Support the ministry of the church through the giving of time, talent and money
- Respond to God's activity in the world through service to others
- Work in the world for peace, justice, freedom and human fulfillment
- And to participate in the governing responsibilities of the church

When Jesus came to the synagogue at Capernaum, with his four fisherman followers, he opened his ministry with a bang. He taught with authority and healed a man with an “unclean spirit” on the spot. A few months later, Jesus would empower his disciples, his growing cadre of followers, with the very same authority. He would send them out to teach about the kingdom of God and heal the hurting in his name.

You and I and all of us here at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Wayne in 2012 have been empowered with the very same authority. We too have been sent out to manifest the kingdom of God on our streets, in our neighborhoods and in our places of work.

As we go about this ministry, we must never forget by whose authority we do it: Christ's. Christ has conferred his authority on us, empowered us to be his partners in transforming the world. May we continue to engage in this blessed work together, and welcome our newest members among us with joy and thanksgiving.

Amen.