



"The Astonishing Authority of Jesus"
Mark 1:21-28

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I was a college student in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so that makes me part of the generation that lived by the words, "*Question Authority.*" When I was in college, there were a lot of student protests against the Vietnam War, with sit-ins and teach-ins and takeovers of academic buildings even taking place on the quiet campus of Westminster College, which was located in the middle of Amish country in western Pennsylvania in a community that had one single blinker light. But "*Question Authority*" was our watchword, along with the hermeneutic of suspicion and doubt.

"*Authority*" for us meant all that was oppressive or repressive in society: those persons and institutions that were in the business of maintaining their own power or promoting their own ideology. "*Authority*" meant those in charge of things who perpetuated all kinds of privileges, whether dealing with race or nationality, gender or class. "*Authority*" was what suppressed human life and spirit and joy, something that imprisoned rather than set free. I have to admit that we were pretty self-righteous in those days, but this questioning of authority served to shape the society in which we live today in profound ways. Because all of us, in one way or another, have become questioners of authority.

And yet, we of the generation told not to trust anyone over age 30 did have people in our lives whose voices were authoritative for us. There were certain teachers or professors, trusted relatives and family friends, maybe even pastors, who gained our confidence and our respect. They were the ones who told us the truth, and who loved us while they did it.

I have a special memory of Dr. Norman Adams, who taught religion and philosophy at Westminster College. When you are beginning your college years, every teacher, and every professor is an authority figure, but for me, as for many of my classmates, Dr. Adams' teaching was authoritative – his words rang true, they resonated deep inside, for there was a connection between what he said and who he was. He didn't teach like the other teachers, but he taught at "*as one having special authority.*" In his late 60's, he stood above the so-called "scribes" of the college's faculty and administration, capturing our hearts and our imaginations, and making the world a little less confusing for us.

Dr. Adams taught us to look past the surface of things into the world around us and in our own souls. He loved teaching us about the nature of religion, and he was unsparing in his critique of anything that sounded false or superficial or trite. He spoke out on the political issues of the day, always cutting through to the heart of the motivations of those who were in power, whether in Washington, DC or in the administrative Offices of Westminster College, often angering those who were in power. He participated in student demonstrations, sometimes speaking up when our voices became muted, sometimes counseling us when our voices became too strident ... but always believing in what was best in us and knowing how to bring it out. I remember him today as someone who opened doors for me that I would not have had the courage to walk through without his prompting.

My guess is that most of you in this room have had someone, perhaps several people, like Dr. Adams in your life: people whose teaching or counsel was authoritative for you because of who they were and how they cared about you. These are people who can give us a whole new understanding of ourselves, who can tell us the truth in such a way that new possibilities of thought and action open up before us. We trust them not only because of what they know, but also because we sense they have our best interests at heart, and what they say rings true.

When Jesus walked into the synagogue of Capernaum, the people there recognized his authority by the way he taught. We are not told the content of his teaching—Mark is always sketchy about details—but we can be sure it was a proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of God. Whatever he said, it was something people had never heard before from their usual authorities. And somehow, Jesus' teaching appears to have provoked both excitement and alarm.

But it wasn't just his words, that astounded the people; it was that he backed up his words with action. He restored the "possessed" man in the synagogue to sanity, liberating him from chaotic and uncontrollable forces that had taken over his life and were destroying his personality. Jesus didn't just talk about the kingdom of God, he demonstrated its liberating power. His announcement of the kingdom heralded his own mastery over all the forces that make human lives less than human. He would go through his ministry unmasking the lies that people tell each other to protect their own power and the lies they tell themselves to resist any disturbances of the status quo.

Jesus' authority, though, is not just a display of power or a dispensation of wisdom from a high pulpit. Because his words and actions are bound together. He is what he teaches, and he has concern for those he teaches. Jesus has the kind of authority that is not just about making decisions; rather, it is the kind of authority that compels decisions in other people. As you may remember, Mark gives us the story of the teaching and healing in the synagogue right after Jesus has summoned Peter and Andrew, James and John out of their fishing boats and into a life of

following him to be fishers of men and women.

In her book ***Traveling Mercies***, Anne Lamott tells the story of her own reluctant assent to the authority of Jesus Christ. Sometime in her late 20's, after her father's death of brain cancer and a breakup with her boyfriend, Lamott began a swift downward spiral into alcoholism and drug abuse. She was having some modest success with her writing, but success was not enough to keep the demons at bay. When the panic rose, she'd drink a bottle of Scotch. She finally realized that she was being brought down by dark forces she was powerless to control, and she had thoughts of suicide.

One night when she happened to be temporarily sober after a traumatic event, as she was lying in bed, ***"shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take another sleeping pill,"*** she became aware that someone was with her, somehow ***"hunkered down in the corner."*** After a while, she knew beyond any shadow of doubt that it was Jesus. She writes: ***"And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant and hilarious progressive friends. I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, 'I would rather die.'"***

In the morning, Jesus was gone, but then he kept coming back, she said, disturbing the weird, unhealthy sort of peace she'd arrived at by means of alcohol and self-contempt. She realized she could do nothing else, but give up and give in. ***"I took a long deep breath and said out loud, 'All right. You can come in.'"*** It was a turning point, a moment of decision. Eventually, she got rid of the alcohol, and all her pills, and her cocaine, and she entered into a new life.

You see, the authority of Jesus Christ is the authority to compel a decision, to place before us an irresistible offer. It is the authority of one who confronts us with the truth in such a way that it commands our attention, and then calls us to obey. It is, beyond question, the authority of one who has nothing but our best interests at heart. For it is the authority of one who liberates us from the things that would kill us, things even more insidious than alcohol or cocaine: such things as the demons of fear and self-loathing, of helpless passivity and resignation, of the preference we all have for living with comfortable illusions rather than uncomfortable truth.

To such a demons as these, Jesus says with authority words that become enacted as he utters them, ***"Be silent. Go away. Be gone."***

Certainly, the world today is no less confusing than it was back when many of us were told to question authority. We still have lots of difficult decisions to make in life, but the truth of our faith is that once we have made the decision to

submit our lives to the authority and truth of Jesus Christ, all the other decisions become a bit easier.

We'll never know exactly what to do in every situation, but we know that if we are submitting to the authority of Jesus, certain choices are clear:

- * We can make a decision for compassion – compassion that includes not only compassion for others in our willingness to be with them amidst all their hurts and hopes, but compassion we show to ourselves, as well as a gentle forgiveness for our own frailties.
 - * We can make a decision for generosity – generosity toward God, toward each other, toward those vulnerable ones in our world who always seem to get the short end of the stick.
 - * We can make a decision for honesty – to speak with the clarity combined with love that we have seen in those other lesser but good authorities in our lives, who have used their influence with us to help us find our best selves.
 - * We can make a decision for courage – not to settle for living in a way that makes us less human by keeping our good gifts of love and faith and imagination all locked up inside us, but giving ourselves to causes greater than ourselves and serving the needs of others in first-hand ways in the hard places in the world, that somehow are also the thin places where God is more clearly seen and experienced.
- * And, we can make a decision for God. When we make the kind of decision that knowledge of Jesus Christ compels, we commit ourselves to living under a new teaching, and a different kind of authority. It is a decision to live a more liberated life, with lots of open doors for us to walk through.

Most importantly in all this, though, there is also, at the very heart of the Christian faith, astonishment. One evening in the 17th century, John Wesley, an Anglican priest and scholar, went reluctantly to a meeting at Aldersgate Street in London. Wesley had led an exhausting life up to this point, journeying to America as a missionary, working day and night for the good of others, preaching until he was almost spent.

At Aldersgate Street, someone was reading from Luther's lecture on Paul's letter to the Romans ... something I suspect that could not have been all that engaging. And yet, Wesley said that night he came to a belief that ***"Christ had died for my sins, even mine,"*** and that his was a ***"strange warming of the heart."*** And thus the Wesleyan revival was ignited, a revival that was stoked by Wesley's astonishment that God loved him and that God's grace was for him.

Blaise Pascal was one of France's greatest minds, a great mathematician and

philosopher. He tried to think his way toward God, but had no success. He spent his whole adult life trying to make sense of the Bible and its witness. Then, late in the night, November 23, 1654, Pascal wrote in his diary, ***“Fire! God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,”*** not of the philosophers and the learned. ***“Certitude. Certitude. Joy. Peace. God of Jesus Christ.”*** It was one of the world’s great conversions, a conversion intimately related to astonishment.

I think that’s partly what’s behind all those who say that the worship of the church, what we’re doing right now, is at the heart of the church, at the heart of the Christian life and faith we share. Because it is in worship that we are seem to be closest to the astonishment on which our faith is based, the astonishment that comes with an encounter with Jesus as the Christ, God in the flesh, as this Jewish teacher from Nazareth who speaks to us still his authoritative and liberating word.

Let us pray: Free us, Lord, to become once more astonished, as we hear your word for us, in Jesus’ name. Amen.