

Scripture: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

18:15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.

18:16 This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die."

18:17 Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said.

18:18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.

18:19 Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

18:20 But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak--that prophet shall die."

Mark 1:21-28

1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

1:22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

1:23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

1:24 and 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."

1:25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

1:27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

1:28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Proclamation of the Word

Have you been to a kid's soccer practice lately? I was a soccer mom for a short stint, and it always fascinated me to watch the parents. I felt sorry for the kids whose parents would try to out coach the coach. You could see their little confused faces while they were trying to play the game. Usually, it was mom or dad yelling for the child to do one thing (usually score) and the coach was trying to tell the child another thing (usually pass). You could see it on the child's face looking at the parent then the coach, then the parent. The child was put in the position to decide to which voice he or she would listen. If they are older children, they would usually side with the coach sending that look to mom or dad that said without words, "The coach is the authority here."

When our children were little I worked at a church with a Child Development Center where our children were cared for. Because I was on site, the teachers wanted to bring my child to me if something was wrong (which frankly upset the both of us). I remember having to tell the teacher, just because I was down the hall when there was a boo boo or an issue, that I expected the teacher to take care of it. I said I trust you to do what is right while my child is in your care. You are the authority. Come to me if there is an emergency as you would to any other parent! You are in charge.

Authority is the question in both situations. My older brothers grew up in the "Question Authority" phase of the 1970s. Being the last child, I grew up in the "Who is the authority?" phase of the 1980's. Now I guess we are in the "Everyone's an authority" age. You can be an authority by blogging or having your voice heard on the web of social media.

Everyone is an expert. Information is widespread. Voices never heard before are heard. Information and connectivity has been democratized. It is a revolution/a reformation that happens about every 500 years according to historical authorities.¹ It is no coincidence that famous Protestant reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther would have just had their 500th birthday. The invention of the printing press, the authority of the Bible, the sovereignty of the nation state, and some corruption in the church spawned a movement, the Protestant Reformation. And don't forget the Holy Spirit had a role.

500 years before the Protestant Reformation was the Great Schism of the Western Christianity (Roman Catholic) and the Eastern Christianity (Eastern Orthodox, etc). And 500 years before that was the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Dark Ages when the monastic Christianity flourished.

Just as a group of reformers questioned the church's authority and the authority of the Pope 500 years ago, we are dealing with our own redefinition and reformation as a church, as a nation, and as a world. In these times of rapid fire change, the question goes back to who and what is the authority. Another word for authority is a catch phrase of the reformation- the Sovereignty of God.

Jesus' authority is the question in today's passage of Scripture. "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." He teaches as one having a recognizable authority.

Lots of folks have authority- law enforcement has authority. Judges have authority. Scholars have authority. Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth, dusty from his long walk, in a synagogue teaches with authority. He has no PhD. no title, or status. The people heard and realized that there was something different about this rabbi. Then Jesus stops talking, he sees a person in need. He stops talking about God and he shows them who God is. God is a God who sees one of his own who needs to be healed. He is an authentic witness to the authority of God over all things that possess us.

Jesus literally brings out the worst in people. He sees this man who has an unclean spirit. "Unclean" in Scripture is a way of describing that which is against God's intentions for us.

Jesus doesn't freak out, pull out a whip, and run him out of the synagogue. Jesus doesn't have the man sent away and punished. Jesus reaches out to the man with the unclean spirit. He looks on the man in love. And while everyone recognized Jesus' authority, this man 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 man who is unclean, unworthy, not whole, recognizes Jesus' authority and knows who Jesus is perhaps better than the faithful worshippers. Isn't that amazing? It is that which is not of God, an unclean spirit, who most clearly can see God's presence and authority in Jesus Christ.

I have to believe that there was something so true, so real, and so honest in his presence that the unclean spirit was brought to light. Being in the presence of Jesus has the power to make the man feel so safe, so beloved that he wanted that which Jesus taught...."Repent, believe the good news. The Kingdom of God is near." And when he heard the message and felt God's presence, the Kingdom of God. Under Jesus' authority, he is set free from that which possesses him. He is healed, made whole, and freed to worship. Jesus continues on an all day Sabbath campaign of healing He heals Peter's mother in law, and many who are sick or possessed all in one day. After all, the Sabbath is a day of worship, rest, and restoration.

When we are in the presence of Jesus, he sees us as we are. He desires for us to be set free, healed, from that which binds us. Do we recognize the unclean spirits that possess us?

Unclean spirits that keep us from God's intentions for our lives are all around:

- Work-a-holism
- *Affluenza*- believing that more stuff, more money will make me happy
- Greed, selfishness, envy, anger
- Addiction to drugs, gambling, pornography, food
- Believing that we are not good enough or deserving of God's grace,
- Believing that we are in and they are out or that we are only responsible for ourselves, not one another
- Spirit of anger or powerlessness or passive-aggression
- Spirits of division- left or right, in or out, haves and have nots, rich and poor.

Unclean Spirits- that which possesses us, and captive to evil and sin destroys the humanity and God-given dignity of God's beloved children. It is in contrast to the sacred, the liberating, saving, love of God in Jesus Christ.

This man may have been in regular attendance at the synagogue, but on this day something about Jesus disturbs the spirit inside him, riles it up, brings it out in the open to the light of day. Jesus who is God's Truth can see it and redeem it...casting it out and freeing the one possessed by it. We need the teaching and authority of Jesus to overcome that which possesses us.

How does God do that in Jesus Christ?

First, Jesus set us free through teaching. In all the din of voices, talk, talk, talk, blah, blah, blah, yadda, yadda, yadda, spewing angry retorts, lobbing accusations, Jesus speaks a WORD of truth- the Kingdom is here, God wants to set us free to live in a new way together where we can worship God, know God, and be in right relationship with our neighbors. Jesus teaches with authority. We seek his teaching by being instructed in God's Word and listening to the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, Jesus creates a safe space for that which is unclean to come out in the open. That is the call of his church, the body of Christ in the world, to be a safe place, a sanctuary, where God's children can be seen in the truth of God's love. Jesus silences the unclean spirits so we can hear the truth of God's saving love and amazing grace. God desires that we are made whole and set free to worship. God desires for us and all God's children to belong to the beloved community where no demons may divide and destroy.

I recently saw the movie *Warrior*² which deals with all kinds of demons that possess us. In one particularly powerful scene toward the end Nick Nolte's character, who has been sober for 1,000 days, relapses after an angry confrontation with his youngest son, Tommy. The son later finds his father in his hotel room with bottles scattered all over and the father truly appears demon possessed as he rages in his drunken state (while listening to Moby Dick on tape no less). The son, who had previously rejected his father then puts his father to bed and gently holds him while he calms down and confesses his deep love for his son. It's a scene of how our demons take hold of us, and how the power of love and forgiveness can make all the difference in our struggle to overcome them.

Out of deep love for the persons Jesus encounters, he confronts demons. He silences the spirits. Like the son holding on relentlessly to the father he loves, Jesus will not let go until the demon is destroyed and the person set free. After all, Jesus came to set captives free.

Jesus taught and healed with authority. But he gives that same authority to his followers. All Christians have been possessed by the Holy Spirit call out the demons, to unmask idolatry, to bring to light the spirits that hold people captive. In fact, we are called to do so.

We call out the demons as Jesus did- to **advocate** for those who cannot speak, who need healing and freedom. The church of Jesus Christ is great at charity/love, but we sometimes fall short in the work of advocacy and justice. You and I need to ask where God is calling us to cast out demons. The need is great. I think of:

- The invisible problem of homelessness in our community
- The brokenness in our families and homes
- Food justice into a world of abundance
- Our brothers and sisters trapped in a cycle of poverty and under-employment
- Our brothers and sisters struggling with disability and health issues without healthcare
- Children who have no voice but need advocates like those who are guardians ad litem
- The lack of mental health resources in this community as I have found when trying to work with a person who cannot care for herself because of her mental illness

Jesus stands in our midst as the one proclaiming the kingdom of God come near. Then he acts. He heals. He speaks. And he empowers his followers to act, to heal, to speak. May we each do our part so that persons can be transformed by the power of God's beloved community, the kingdom of God. He who was born into the world to save sinners comes with authority and gives that power to us, his disciples.

As I mentioned earlier, the child playing soccer knows that it is his job is to keep listening to the voice of the coach who is the authority on the soccer field.

As Christians we must keep our ears turned to the voice of Jesus, over all voices, our authority for faith and life.

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¹See Phyllis Tickle's work *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. (Baker Books: Grand Rapids) 2008.

²*Warrior*, directed by Gavin O'Conner, Lion's Gate Studios, 2011.