"A Question of Authority" – February 1, 2015

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

Back in the 60's, Christian Herter was running for a second term as governor of Massachusetts. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and Herter was famished. As Herter moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and then turned to the next person in line. "Excuse me," Governor Herter said, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?"

"Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person." "But I'm starved," the governor said. "Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer." Governor Herter was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided that this time he would throw a little weight around. "Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state."

"Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister." (Quoted on bible.org, from Bits & Pieces, May 28, 1992, Page 5-6)

From an early age we learn that other people have power and authority over us. For some of us it's a hard lesson to learn. We have all heard horror stories about toddlers who try to assert their own independence to the chagrin of mom and dad. But in time, after fits of crying and temper tantrums, they usually learn that their caregivers are the ones in control of what they can and cannot do. A hard lesson indeed.

Eventually this understanding of authority becomes second nature. Children come home from school believing every word the teacher said. Teachers are in charge of learning. They're considered to be walking and talking receptacles of knowledge, so they must know everything. One day your young child says in wonder, "Mrs. Jones said that the world is round." Of course, you've told him the very same thing a hundred times. But it doesn't sink in until the teacher says that it's true. It can be devastating when a child discovers that a beloved teacher was wrong about something. We want to believe in authority figures, and it's hard to comprehend them being wrong.

Aristotle was regarded as a great thinker. Not knowing the Law of Gravity, he claimed that a heavier object would fall to earth from a great height more quickly than a lighter object. Even though anyone could have taken two objects, one heavy and one light, and dropped them from a height to test his theory, no one did for nearly 2000 years. Then in 1589 Galileo gathered together a group of professors to stand at the base of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. From the top of the tower Galileo dropped a ten-pound weight and a one-pound weight at the same time. So strong was their belief that Aristotle could not be wrong, the professors denied it when both objects hit the ground at the same moment. They could not imagine Aristotle being wrong about something, so great was his authority to them.

In the Merriam-Webster dictionary, one of the definitions of authority is the "power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior." Our lessons from Deuteronomy and Mark have the theme of authority in common. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses is teaching the Israelites before they enter the Promised Land. He has been telling them about the role of the public leaders, the people who will be in authority over them. His discussion covered judges, kings and priests, and then our lesson from chapter 18 talks about the authority of prophets.

Back when Moses had received the Law at Mt Sinai, God had spoken to the Israelites, giving them the Ten Commandments. The people were frightened to hear the voice of God, and they begged for Moses to be the mediator of God's word to them so they wouldn't have to hear God directly. The prophets who would follow Moses would be like him in that they too would mediate God's word to the people and proclaim God's will. This institution of the role of prophet in Israel's future is significant.

The prophets who came after Moses and proclaimed God's word and warned the people of God's displeasure weren't just random voices speaking up. They filled a particular office that had been established. They were divinely authorized and were given the power and authority to speak out to the people. The people were warned to heed the words of the prophet. They were to be taken seriously and to be honored. But as Israelite history has shown, the voices of the prophets were often not welcomed nor were they heeded.

The prophets themselves were also warned. False prophets, those who spoke words not commanded by God, were to be put to death. In the Book of Jeremiah we hear of such a false prophet. Hananiah falsely claimed to speak for God and lied to the people of Israel. Jeremiah caught him in the act and prophesied his death. Hananiah died within the year. Prophets were not to speak on behalf of other gods. Furthermore they were not to water down the word of God. They were to follow in the footsteps of Moses by witnessing to the God of the Exodus and proclaiming the covenant, commands and promises of God that were given at Mt. Sinai.

As time passed in Israel's history, this text in Deuteronomy came to be interpreted not as merely referring to the entire prophetic line but instead was thought to picture one particular prophet who would come before the end of time, or at the time of the Messiah. Like Moses, this prophet would be a redemptive leader, a worker of miracles, a person of great authority, and a giver of laws. It is easy for us Christians to see how Jesus fits this description of a great prophet like Moses who was to come. But that's because we know the whole story. Those persons back in the first century didn't know who Jesus was, and their understanding came over time as his identity was revealed to them.

So let's look at the story from Mark's Gospel. In today's lesson we learn that the first act of Jesus' public ministry is to teach in the synagogue in the town of Capernaum. The people who hear him are astounded. Why? Because Jesus doesn't teach like the scribes. He teaches as one having authority.

To understand this we need to know who the scribes were. The scribes were the learned people, the scholars. They spent their time studying the law, the Torah, and interpreting that law for others. Based upon their studies, they could draw conclusions and then present the information to the people. The authority of the scribes comes from what other scholars have said before them. But Jesus is different. He speaks on behalf of God. He doesn't rehash what other people have said. He speaks as a prophet, as one whose authority and words come directly from God.

And this evident by not only his manner of teaching but by what comes next in the story. While Jesus is teaching, a man with an unclean spirit enters the synagogue. Immediately, the unclean or evil spirit recognized who Jesus was, and cried out, "What do you have to do with us, Jesus! Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, you're the Holy One of God!" Ironically, this unclean spirit knows more about Jesus than anyone else.

In the ancient world, evil spirits were believed to be the cause of numerous physical and mental maladies. To be under the control of an unclean spirit was tragic because it caused one to be ostracized from the rest of society. No one wanted to be around a person categorized as unclean or having an unclean spirit for fear that the "uncleanness" would rub off.

Seemingly without effort, Jesus simply commands the unclean spirit to shut up and get out of the man. With one parting seizure and a cry of defeat, the spirit leaves. Indeed the unclean spirit was correct about Jesus, because in fact, Jesus did come into the world to overthrow all those powers that would cause a person to be considered unclean and marginalized from the rest of society.

And this action by Jesus there in the synagogue cemented the assertion his hearers already made. This Jesus taught with authority. Not only did his teachings sound different than that of the scribes but his teachings exhibited power. He had the power to command others. Even the unclean spirits that existed merely to torment and keep people down were no match to this new teaching.

In our 21st century mindset, we may scoff at the idea of being possessed or controlled by an unclean spirit. This story seems to have little to do with our very rational lives here in Central Wisconsin. We don't hear of too many exorcisms happening around town. But let's think about this for a minute. There are indeed unclean powers that can assert control over us. We **do** allow things of this world to have authority over our lives.

A friend of mine once preached on this text and shared this story with his congregation. He told about his grandfather who had struggled all his life with alcoholism. The only way his grandfather could confront the power the addiction had over him was through faith in Christ. Only his faith in Jesus, and the authority that he gave Jesus over his life, gave him the ability to say no to the overwhelming desire for alcohol. Here was a man who could understand how the power of an unclean spirit could assert control over his life.

I could give you a list of similar things that threaten to control people just like you and me. Greed, pride, gambling, prejudice, pornography, materialism, revenge, any number of addictions, rage, feelings of entitlement. The list goes on and on. I was watching an old episode of Oprah, and she was doing a program on people addicted to shoplifting. These are normal people, who can afford to buy the things, but have an uncontrollable urge to steal. When asked, the people said it was like they had no control over their actions. The statistics are surprising. Something like 1 in 12 people shoplift on a regular basis. And at face value, they look like average people. Nothing on the surface hinted at the overwhelming power that consumed their inner selves and directed their actions.

I think each one of us here, if we give it some thought, can name at least one negative thing that has authority in our lives. And often these things have such a hold over us, we find it hard to rid ourselves of them. Sometimes the power of its authority over us is so strong, we may not want to give it up. But even when we do get the point of desiring to be free of the bondage of this unclean spirit, we often cannot rid ourselves of it on our own. The good news is that Christ has come to defeat the powers that overwhelm us. He comes bringing liberation, to free us from the evil that binds us and controls us. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves who or what holds the authority in our lives? Is there something that has gotten beyond our control and has too much power in our lives?

In Arthur Miller's autobiography Timebends he tells of his brief marriage to Marilyn Monroe. During the filming of the movie *The Misfits*, Miller witnessed the actress descend into the depths of depression and despair. He feared for her life, as he watched their growing estrangement, her paranoia, and her dependence on barbiturates. One evening, after a doctor gave her a shot so Marilyn could sleep, Miller reflected, "I found myself straining to imagine miracles. What if she were to wake and I were able to say, 'God loves you, darling,' and she were able to believe it. How I wish I still had my religion and she hers." (Quoted in a sermon "The Teacher", by Dean William Willimon, Duke Divinity School)