

Romans 14:7-9

Mark 1:21-28

January 31, 2021

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Last Sunday the session ordained Kelli Norris and installed her, Greg Maready, and Hayes Ludlum as Ruling Elders in the church of Jesus Christ and for this congregation. Remember, the title “Ruling Elder” doesn’t mean wielding authority to satisfy one’s own interests. Instead, the position of Ruling Elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is based on what Jesus said to his disciples who were irritated when James and John asked Jesus to put them in positions of power in his kingdom. Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28, New International Version) Indeed, Jesus’ words are cited in the very definition of “Ruling Elder” in our church’s *Book of Order*: “Ruling elders are so named not because they ‘lord it over’ the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life.” (*Book of Order*, Section G-2.0301)

Remember that Kelli, Greg, and Hayes answered nine constitutional questions during the ordination/installation service. During elder training, I emphasized to them that Teaching Elders (ministers) answer the same first eight questions when they are ordained and installed. Only the ninth question is different, and it has to do with the particular work/ministry to be done in the church. Even though our elders answered these questions as they assumed positions of leadership and responsibility in our church, the first two questions are commitments each of us is asked to make when we respond to Jesus’ call and claim upon our lives in the words, “Follow me.”

*Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, ***acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church***, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

* Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, ***the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ*** in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?

Notice that our profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of all and our acceptance of the Scriptures as God’s Word means that we recognize the authority of Christ over our lives and in all the world. That’s why we talk about everything we do as a church being under “the authority of Christ.” In the opening paragraphs of our church’s *Book of Order*, which is part of our church’s constitution and explains who we

are, why we are, and what we do, we affirm this about the authority of Christ: “Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body. The Church’s life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work.” (*Book of Order*, Section F-1.0201)

That last sentence – “The Church’s life and mission are a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work.” – reminds us of Jesus’ call to Simon and Andrew on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” (Mark 1:17) When we recognize the authority of Jesus Christ and respond to his call, we find ourselves caught up in the ongoing mission and ministry of sharing and believing the good news.

But before we can accept and submit to the authority of Christ, we have to recognize the authority of Christ. We live in a world in which countless voices clamor for our attention and devotion. Instead of clarifying issues, the multitude of messages makes it that much harder to know whom to believe and trust and follow. Although some people argue that the slogan has its roots in the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, the bumper sticker message “Question Authority” was made popular by Dr. Timothy Leary in the 1960’s and gained much traction after the Watergate scandal in the 1970’s. You might not see many of those bumper stickers these days, but the sentiment is alive and kicking in the 21st century!

It’s tempting to focus our attention on the man possessed with the unclean spirit in today’s gospel story. All you have to do is imagine what would happen if on a Sunday morning someone stood up in this sanctuary and began writhing around and shouting. But, even before that, imagine a stranger coming in on a Sunday morning, climbing into the pulpit, and beginning to preach. It would not be your typical worship service!

That seems to be what happened on that sabbath day in the synagogue in Capernaum. We have no indication that Jesus was known to the people who had gathered for worship. Even though it was customary and allowed for any adult male to teach and preach, it was typically at the invitation of the synagogue leaders. And yet, Mark suggests that Jesus went into the synagogue and simply began to teach.

We don’t know what Jesus began to teach (although it certainly had to do with the kingdom of God, repentance, and believing in the good news), but Mark clearly tells us about the congregation’s reaction: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” (Mark 1:22) That’s a pretty good evaluation of preaching! But I wonder how the scribes felt . . .

Well, as religious leaders who studied God’s Word, consulted what others had taught and preached, and tried to bring that Word to bear on the peoples’ lives, I imagine the scribes probably felt threatened. And I can back that up by citing scripture. When Jesus was in the temple in Jerusalem during the last week of his life, “the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?’” (Mark 11:27-28) Instead

of answering their question directly, Jesus told them a parable. Then we find out, “When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So, they left him and went away.” (Mark 12:12)

I imagine when Jesus preached and taught, there was a certain winsomeness and compelling power in his speaking. In today’s gospel story, Mark squeezes the miracle story of Jesus driving out the unclean spirit between the bookends of the worshipers saying, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority!” In other words, as they say, Jesus walked the talk and practiced what he preached. From time to time, I don’t have to preach a sermon on Sunday. It might be Youth Sunday or the choir is singing a cantata or the children are presenting their Christmas pageant. Inevitably, someone will say, “I guess you’re glad to get the week off, huh?” To be honest, when I don’t have a sermon to prepare, my whole week’s schedule gets out of whack. My weekly schedule is shaped by my work on my sermon. I read, I study, I think, I pray, I listen in Bible study – and, finally, I write and preach. That’s my calling, my responsibility, my job, and my joy. But, if you listen carefully week to week, you’ll hear me say things such as “I read an interesting article . . .” or “In his commentary on this passage . . .” or “The church has traditionally believed . . .” If you look at a manuscript that Cheryl sends out each week, you’ll see footnotes citing my sources. In other words, I may have the authority and responsibility to preach God’s Word, but I don’t have the **original authority** to speak God’s Word. That belongs to Jesus Christ, who not only has the original authority to speak God’s Word, but **is** God’s Word to us.

I read an interesting article this week (see, there you go!) about “Ministerial Authority.” The author writes, “Ministerial authority is the authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. Properly ministerial authority comes from Christ, and not the church. Ministerial authority is a servant authority bound to the declaration, exhibition and display of Christ and His benefits. . . Practically this means that the minister’s authority is truly found only at the font, the table, and the pulpit.” The author talks about the congregation’s response to that proclamation: “Ministers do not have the authority to demand or force a response. Such work is the gracious ministry of the Spirit of God. Rather, ministers have the authority, as delegated servants of Christ, to declare the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Which, though foolishness to the world, is for us the power and wisdom of God.”¹

Let me leave you with these thoughts. I will continue to strive to declare the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. Our elders have vowed to lead us and nurture us in the faith under the authority of Christ. I invite you, encourage you, perhaps even challenge you, to consider what it means to recognize the authority of Christ in your life and to heed Jesus’ call, “Follow me.” Read and study your Bible. Get involved in a Bible study group. Pray. Worship regularly. Find ways to be involved in outreach and caring in Jesus’ name. Seek God’s will in everything you do. My guess is that when you open your heart and your life to the authority of Christ, you will find yourself being led into “a joyful participation in Christ’s ongoing life and work.”

Let us pray: O God, may we hear your Word proclaimed this day. Open our minds and hearts to be changed. Free us from the unclean spirits of worry, fear, destruction, and pride. Teach us, Lord, that we may follow you more faithfully. Amen.

NOTES

¹Rufus T. Burton, "Ministerial Authority," at www.presbyterianmission.org.