

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church     Pinole, CA

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany: January 31, 2021

“Jesus’ Authority”

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good Morning, and don't forget the annual meeting that follows after the service.

I spent a good amount of time on today's Gospel and have found it spoke to me in multiple ways, and with different meanings. I often wonder about God's timing around my work trying to interpret His word for you in a way that is traditional, but speaks to our present needs, and I try to open new spiritual doors that can bring us closer to God.

I mention God's timing because I began just last week to listen to an audio book that delves into the neuroscience and bodily experiences of dementia and schizophrenia. Then our Gospel today has a man either possessed by some entity, or having a mental breakdown. Either way, this man was greatly distressed and there is something to be said about his confrontation with Jesus.

This cleansing of the possessed man shows up twice in the Gospels. It is here in Mark, and shows up again almost word for word in Luke chapter 4. In both these tellings of the story, the focus is on Jesus' authority. These Gospel writers wanted everyone to know that Jesus was of God; Jesus was God sent. That what Jesus was saying did not depend on the world around him, but rather on the direct interpretation of God. So much so, that Jesus can command order out of the chaos of a man's mind and soul.

In fact, most of us are aware that Jesus' teachings upset the traditional modes of religious understanding. He was on the homeless side, from a modest family, a carpenter-tradesman, from the line of David, and he often defied the traditional rules of society in acts of compassion, healing and modeling mercy. We also know that he claimed the temple to be His father's house and was disgusted by its misuse as an economy in and of its own. And he did this all with authority.

Next week, if you are a liturgical geek, and look at the daily readings, you will see that Tuesday we celebrate the story of Jesus being presented in the temple as a

young boy, and again the reader is reminded that Jesus has been sent by God, and there is no mistake as to his holiness or his authority.

So that leads us to the question of whether or not we recognize Jesus' authority and holiness today? And if we do recognize his authority in our lives today, what does that look like?

What is that ultimate authority? Bishop Curry would say that ultimate authority is love. In his most recent book *Love is the Way*, Curry states:

“Where selfishness hurts and harms, love helps and heals. Where selfishness enslaves, love sets free and liberates. The way of love will show us the right thing to do, every single time. It is moral and spiritual grounding—and a place of rest—amid the chaos that is often part of life. It’s how we stay decent in indecent times. Loving is not always easy, but like with muscles, we get stronger.”

I believe this is the motivation of Jesus in today’s scripture, and I think it was at some point juxtaposed to what people expected. When confronted with the possessed man, Jesus did not concoct a potion, or sacrifice an animal, or any of the many things a “healing shaman” of his day could do; he simply spoke. Or should we say commanded with authority, the unclean spirit to leave.

But the motivation to cleanse the man, the real reason, was love. In fact anytime Jesus was put in a position where society put him to the test, he responded with love. Not the wimpy, soft, gooey love we often feel is emasculating, but love with authority. Choosing to act out of love, no matter what the expectations, no matter what the consequences. So much so, that it made people angry enough to eventually crucify him.

We are called in this tiny scriptural story to recognize the authority Jesus has. The power of Jesus’ words. The power of Jesus’ compassion to cleanse a man in distress.

Now most of us would not consider ourselves possessed by unclean spirits, but we are possessed by old traditions, biases we were taught as children, some not-so-healthy ways of coping or relating to others, and even some down-right unhealthy thoughts about ourselves at times. We continue to struggle through a pandemic that has brought out the best and the worst in us.

It is during these struggles we can use the authority of Jesus: the authority, strength and commanding nature of Christ to set us free. As Bishop Curry tells us, “The way of love will show us the right thing to do, every single time.” It may not be the fun thing, or the popular thing, or the easiest thing to allow Jesus’ teachings of compassion and forgiveness to move us forward. Or to simply let go through prayer in Jesus’ name whatever was holding on to us that is causing us distress. But it can be done.

Jesus was teaching the crowds the meaning of scripture with authority. He is still teaching us today. The words that were written centuries ago, continue to speak. Every time we listen to Jesus we see. When there is a discrepancy in theology, or tradition, Jesus leads with love, because that was God’s original intention.

I believe Christ the Lord Church has and continues to lead with Christ as Lord. I see solid proof that we are trying so very hard to live into a faith of love and compassion. And although this year has been a different and often difficult one, I believe this church as a whole has managed thus far to demonstrate love in many various ways.

While the writers of the Gospels of Mark and Luke were looking for the authority of a Messiah in the historical tradition of a conqueror savior, they were met with God’s plan of a savior who expressed his authority through love and sacrifice. Let us not make the same mistake of putting righteous anger before mercy.

Jesus’ authority is not about hocus pocus miracles, lining up armies, or even tearing down the ancient structures of his faith. Rather it is about calling out what is unclean and ungodly to the forefront and naming it, and then releasing it through compassion. After all is said and done, it was for Jesus, about compassion for a man who was suffering.

Let us as a church continue using Jesus’ authority to do good in the world. Let us use Jesus’ authority as God’s son to release our own demons, anything that keeps us from loving ourselves and others. And as Bishop Curry reminds us, “loving is not always easy, but like with muscles, we get stronger.” Go forward today in Jesus’ name, in the authority of Christ, to name what needs to be gone, to admit what is unclean in our lives and our community, and work toward releasing it in the name of love. Amen

Curry, Michael B. (p. 27). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.