

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Sunday, January 28, 2018

St. Mark 1:22, **“And they were astonished at His teaching; for He taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.”**

Dear Christians,

Anybody can say just about anything. But if you say something and don't have the authority to say it, your words are meaningless. They accomplish nothing. For instance, I could call WDAN tonight and say, “Danville Lutheran School is canceling classes for tomorrow, Monday, January 29.” Guess what. There will still be school tomorrow. I don't have the authority to close school and cancel classes. Only Mrs. Wright has that authority. When she says there's not going to be school; there's not going to be school.

I could write you a prescription for some antibiotics--a Z Pack, Zithromax. Guess what? If you took that piece of paper to a pharmacy, they'd crumple it up and throw it away. You'd walk out of the pharmacy without the medication you need. I don't have the authority to prescribe medications. Only a doctor, a physician's assistant, or a nurse practitioner, has that authority. When they write out a prescription it gets filled. You go home with medication. And, Lord willing, you get better.

People noticed that something was different about Jesus' teaching. Something was different about the words that came out of His mouth. When the crowds heard Jesus and His teaching they were amazed, they were astonished, they were dumbstruck. Why? Because He taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

Jesus didn't need to quote the rabbis or the religious tradition to lend authority to His teaching, like the scribes did. Jesus didn't need to footnote what He taught or identify the sources on which His teaching was based. No, Jesus' teaching was His own. The Word made flesh, the One who is full of grace and truth, the One who is truth itself spoke with authority—an authority that was His own as the very Son of the Most High God.

So, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus at times contradicts the teachings of the rabbis and the Jewish tradition. Jesus says things like, **“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I, I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”** At other times Jesus just taught things without referencing former teachers and teachings for support. Like when Jesus says, **“Ask and it will be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and it shall be opened to you.”**

And if the Jews were astonished at Jesus teaching; if they were wowed by the authority He demonstrated when He taught; imagine what must have gone through their minds when Jesus rebuked the man with an unclean spirit, when Jesus said to him, **“Be**

silent and come out of him” and the unclean spirit came out! St. Mark tells us what their reaction was. They said, **“What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him.”**

To the Pharisees who doubted that Jesus had authority to forgive sins, Jesus said, **“But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins’—He said to the paralytic—‘I say to you take up your bed, and go home.’”** And the paralytic, whom Jesus had forgiven, got up and went home! Mark tells us, **“...they were all amazed and glorified God saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”**

Jesus put his fingers in the ears of a deaf man and said, **“Ephphatha—be opened.”** Suddenly the deaf man could hear and speak. Mark tells us, **“They were astonished beyond measure saying, ‘He has done all things well. He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak.’”** Jesus said to the dead daughter of Jairus, **“Arise.”** And she got up and began walking around. Mark tells us, **“They were immediately overcome with amazement.”**

Yes, Jesus and His Word have authority! Amazing authority! Astonishing authority! Authority to do what He says and give what He promises! Authority to impart wisdom and create faith! Authority to forgive sins! Authority to heal sicknesses! Authority to drive out demons! Authority to give life to the dead!

The Church at large, our congregation, I as a pastor, our day school teachers, each of us as the baptized children of God—we must not attempt to speak on our own authority. Our own words, our personal opinions, and our homespun spiritual insights have no authority to establish the teaching and the practice of the Church or to impart spiritual blessing to sinners. And we are fools if we think that our own creativeness, our own eloquence, our strategic planning—not to mention political correctness, pandering to the popular culture, or niche marketing will secure the future of our congregation or win souls to Christ.

No, if the Church and her members are going to speak with authority; if pastors are going to preach with authority; if teachers are going to teach with authority, if the baptized people of God are going to impart words that are vested with spiritual authority and loaded with spiritual blessing, then we must speak Jesus’ words, teach His teachings, and preach what He preached.

Jesus is still wielding authority through His Word. Amazing authority! Astonishing authority! But sometimes we miss it. We miss it because that astonishing authority of Jesus and His Word is found in the Holy Scriptures printed on not-so-astonishing paper with not-so-astonishing ink in not-so-astonishing human language. We miss it because that astonishing authority of Jesus and His Word is preached from the pulpit and taught in our classrooms and spoken in our homes and communities by not-so-astonishing pastors and teachers and laypeople. We miss it because that astonishing authority of Jesus and His Word is added to not-so-astonishing water in Holy Baptism and not-so-astonishing bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper.

But make no mistake. Jesus and His Word still have and always will have authority! Amazing authority! Astonishing authority! Authority to do what He says and give what He promises. Authority to impart wisdom and create faith in your heart and the hearts of others! Authority to forgive your sins and the sins of others! Authority to heal the sickness that assaults your body and mind and the bodies and minds of others! Authority to deliver you and others from the devil and his demons. Authority to give spiritual life to you who were and those who are dead in sins and trespasses. Authority to give new and eternal life on the Last Day to your dead body and the dead bodies of all believers in Christ.

And so it is, when the absolution is spoken in our services, Jesus' authority to forgive sins is being exercised. That's why the pastor says, "**As a call and ordained servant of Christ and BY HIS AUTHORITY, I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**" Your sins really are forgiven—by Jesus, by His authority. Astonishing!

In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, the words of Jesus, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given, were spoken over you. Jesus promises that when you were baptized in the name of the Triune God you were made His disciple. You were born again as God's holy child. You were transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son in which you have redemption—the forgiveness of sins. Astonishing!

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, the words of Jesus are spoken over bread and wine. Those words have authority and cause the bread that you eat to also be His body that was given into death for you and for all sinners. Those words have authority and cause the wine that you drink to also be His blood that was poured out for you on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. Astonishing!

When the words of Jesus are read and preached and taught and spoken to you and by you, Jesus Himself is preaching and teaching and speaking His words of eternal life. His words that enter our ears and leave our mouths actually give us and others life everlasting. Astonishing! On the Last Day when Jesus says, "Arise" you will come out of your grave to live forever. Astonishing!

Because Jesus' Word has authority we, as dearly loved and redeemed sinners, can hear it with confidence—confidence that it does for us what He says and gives to us what He promises. Because Jesus' Word has authority we, as His disciples, His Church, can speak it with confidence—confidence that it will do for others what it says and give to them what He promises. Astonishing!

In Jesus' name
Amen