

July 15, 2018

*“Divine Authority”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 1:21-28

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Over this past week, there's been a lot in the news! President Trump meeting with Putin, Theresa May, the NATO Alliance, and of course, his nominee, to the Supreme Court, Judge Brett Kavanaugh. Someone once told me the most powerful people in the country are Supreme Court justices. More powerful than the President, more powerful than Congress, more powerful than our armed forces. Why? Well, these nine justices are appointed for life, they decide on the constitutionality of all our laws, they alone can interpret laws and affect their implementation, and they review the validity of all legal decisions. It's within their purview to essentially decide the course of our history – for instance, whether the death penalty is to be enforced, whether abortion is to be allowed, whether a person's private property can be taken by the government, or what place religion will have in this country. In an odd sort of way, it seems these men and women have power even over what God might deem to be right and wrong. And if you think about it, you have to wonder how such power, such influence, can be placed in the hands of nine individuals who perhaps may be no more wise or simple than ourselves. Remember, the Supreme Court has no army to back them up, no power of the purse, nothing. So where does it get its incredible power?

Well, it comes simply from our understanding and acceptance of the very principle of authority. Throughout history, mankind has generally accepted four types of authority. First, there's traditional authority. Traditional authority is derived from long-established habits and social structures. Simply put – it's tradition! For example, monarchies today are the most obvious example of this kind of authority. Just look at how this country still today, two hundred and forty years after the Revolution, respects and gives deference to the Queen of England, as we saw this week as well. Another example is the military. Take for instance, Navy captains, who have complete and absolute authority on the high seas. You may have heard the story about the captain of a battleship who, one dark and stormy night was informed by the bridge, the ship's command center, that a light was spotted ahead and they were on a direct, collision course. The captain ordered the bridge to radio the light, “Advise you to alter your course 20 degrees south.” Back came a reply, “Advise you, alter your course 20 degrees south.” The captain said, “Send, I am Captain Jones of the United States Navy and I'm in charge of our biggest ship of the line. I am ordering you to alter your course 20 degrees south, now.” Back came the reply, “I am bosun 3<sup>rd</sup> class Jones, and with all due respect sir, I cannot comply. I am in charge of a lighthouse.” So you can see the respect we have for traditional authority, even when they're sometimes wrong.

Now a second type of authority is charismatic authority. This is authority that results from a leader's personal magnetism and influence. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi embodied charismatic authority. It's based on personality, but also on the popularity of the principles and ideas they promote. The third kind of authority is rational authority. This is where people establish the necessary institutions and laws so that society can function in a civilized manner. A primary example is, of course, the Constitution of the United States of America and our system of government, and yes, the Supreme Court.

Which brings me to the fourth type of authority that some of humankind accept, and some do not. And that is divine authority. Divine authority! And that's really what today's Scripture is all about. As we look this summer at the miracles of Jesus, this story lays the groundwork for us in this regard. Now the word most frequently translated as "miracle" in the New Testament literally means a "sign." And that sign not only results in something out of the ordinary, but also attests to the authority of the person who performs the miracle. Now we heard today, "They were astounded at his teachings, for he taught them as one having authority." But what made these people in the synagogue stand up and take notice of the authority of Jesus? Well, imagine what Jesus may have been teaching. Perhaps things like:

*"You have heard the law say, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!"*

Or...

*"You know the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over others. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be a servant."*

Or...

*"Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets."*

Or...

*"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. For what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul? Is anything worth more than your soul?"*

Or...

*"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him."*

Now think a minute about these teachings of Jesus. You see, they go against traditional authority – the social and cultural structures of the day. “Rulers in this world lord it over their people and officials flaunt their authority, but among you it will be different.” These teachings go against rational authority – the laws and structures established by the religious leaders. “You have heard the law say, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies!” And people were amazed and excited. “What new teaching is this? It has such authority!” And isn’t it true – aren’t these statements uplifting, inspiring, comforting, loving....and even divine? Yes, Jesus spoke with authority!

And then it happened. A man there started to raise a ruckus. St. Mark described it as an evil spirit, or demonic, that possessed the man. But Jesus rebukes the demon and performs his miracle – ordering it out of the man. And so what does this mean for us? Well, many interpret this as the power that Jesus Christ can have in our lives by removing those demons which rule us. Like addiction, racism, sexual obsession, the lust for power, and plain old worry, guilt, greed, and self-centeredness. And that's true. We spoke about those things last week, when Jesus performed a miracle and asked the crippled man at the pool, "Do you want to be made well?" We were reminded of those things that cripple us and how by putting our hope and trust in Jesus Christ, we can be made well again. So let's consider for a moment that there may be something more to this miracle and that demon.

What if that demon represents another authority we look to in our lives. That “authority” that influences our decisions, our opinions, our lifestyle, our actions, in ways that are opposed to God’s divine authority. You know what’s interesting? In just a few short verses prior to today's Scripture reading, St. Mark describes' Jesus time in the wilderness where he faces off against the ultimate demon, Satan himself. Where Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, and he says, with authority, “I will give it all to you, if you worship me.” Yes, even Jesus was tempted by Satan with wealth and power and the things of this world. Just like we all are. But Jesus overcame Satan by listening to and following the divine authority of God. And the question is – what authority will we listen to?

I think the Rev. William Sloane Coffin sums it up perfectly by saying, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. That's all well and good, but Christ who spoke those words, also knows that just as foxes spoil the vineyard, so it is that our (worldly desires) undermine the spiritual foundations of our lives. After all, it was for only thirty pieces of silver that Judas forfeited his eternal birthright. And

are we not tempted to do the same?" So when we consider today's miracle, the question we really need to ask ourselves is whether or not we accept the authority of Jesus Christ as Lord of our life. Does he rule your heart and your mind and your life? Do you follow his teachings and commands? Do you put your entire faith and trust in his hands? Because if you do make Jesus the full and final authority in your life, you know what happens? Then you can walk the extra mile, forgive seventy times seven, love your neighbor as you love yourself, be a servant to others, take up the cross, pass the bread, share the wine, and be assured of your eternal birthright in heaven. And that, my friends, is a miracle! Amen.