

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon Text: Mark 1:21-28
Related Text: 1 Corinthians 8:1-13
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Date Preached: February 1, 2009

Grace to you and peace from God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.

By what authority do you do this? That is but one question lurking in the minds of those in Capernaum who have just witnessed Jesus drive out a demon.

In 2009, we might ask the same question not just of Jesus, but in fact, of anyone who is in authority. By what authority do you do what you do? How did you gain the authority you have?

In today's world we tend to look to people in authority who will agree with our opinions. We look for people in authority to settle arguments. We look to people in authority to give us direction.

Unfortunately, there is a lot of skepticism as it relates to people in authority. Government authority figures deal with such skepticism which gets reinforced as a result of scandal, be it Watergate, Clinton's affair, or most recently the impeachment of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich.

Authority figures in the church have also struggled with temptation and have succumbed to it. Like those in government offices, it is the mistakes of the fallen few that get highlighted on the news. The resulting fallout is that distrust is fostered. Such distrust leaks out like the ripples in a pond and casts a shroud over all in authority.

Thus, when the church does speak out with authority on issues that are not popular, the church's authority is questioned. Likewise, when issues arise, some will appeal to the authority of Scripture, while others may suggest that the Bible's authority is outdated.

All of these examples and no doubt countless other examples from various aspects of society I think raise a larger question for us. What authority does God have today?

Do we view God's authority as a dictator telling us always what to do or not do? Some don't feel as if God should have any authority over our lives. Yet, there are some who see God's authority like that of a parent.

Think of the loving parents we've known be it our own or others. Loving parents will provide rules that are designed to keep their children safe. Loving

parents also treat their children with grace, bestowing upon them things they don't deserve or haven't earned. There are even times, especially as children grow older where loving parents will let their children make mistakes so that they may learn from them.

From the children's perspective we don't always see rules as being for our own good. We often feel more entitled to things as opposed to seeing what is given as a gift. We often fail to accept parents' advice, or question them when they've let us make our own mistakes.

Frequently, Jesus uses the image of a loving father to describe God's relationship with us. Yes, God has authority over our lives. At times such authority is a struggle for us to accept.

God's desire that couples remain celibate until marriage is but one example that runs countercultural in today's world. Some struggle to accept such authority as being irrelevant. Couples think they will be different from the affects that such behavior can have from the physical health related issues to the psychological impact such behavior can foster, as well then as the parental authority they hope to one

day exercise when attempting to teach their children to act in a way they themselves could not.

At other times we celebrate God's authority. We believe that God created heaven and earth. We teach that God has given us dominion or authority over the rest of creation. Such dominion and authority includes practicing good stewardship of what God has made.

As we heard in our reading from the Gospel, Jesus has authority over the unclean spirits. This may be hard for us to realize what exactly the unclean spirit was that infected this individual. Whatever this spirit was, it yielded to Jesus authority.

That will be a common refrain through the Gospel readings from Mark. Jesus, the son of God exercises authority over unclean spirits, over nature, and over the religious leaders who misinterpret the law and tradition.

We celebrate that God has the power to bring healing to the sick. We celebrate, as we should, God's authority over the forces of sin, death and the devil. We celebrate God's authority to forgive us our sins.

Yet, we don't get to pick and choose where God uses his authority or even refrains from using his authority. That can raise in our minds some interesting and hard to answer questions.

Even so, what we know and what we proclaim is that God's authority is for our best interest. God's authority is for our life; it is for our quality of life in this world and for the abundant life that is to come in the fullness of God's kingdom. AMEN.