

“Which Dog to Feed?”  
Mark 1:21-28

A Department of Water Resources representative stops at a Texas ranch and talks with an old rancher. He tells the rancher, "I need to inspect your ranch for your water allocation." The old rancher says, "Okay, but don't go in that field over there." The Water representative says, "Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government with me.. See this card? This card means I am allowed to go WHEREVER I WISH on any agricultural land. No questions asked or answered. Have I made myself clear? Do you understand?" The old rancher nods politely and goes about his chores. Later, the old rancher hears loud screams and sees the Water Rep running for his life. And close behind is the rancher's bull. The bull is gaining with every step. The Rep is clearly terrified, so the old rancher immediately throws down his tools, runs to the fence and yells at the top of his lungs..... "Your card! Show him your card!"

I am sure the bull was not going to recognize the authority of the representative. Who defines authority and what holds authority for us? The question about authority is at the heart of our Scripture story this morning. Jesus and his disciples were in Capernaum in the synagogue teaching on a Sabbath and then he performs an exorcism of an unclean spirit. The way the story is told shows us that the most significant part of the story is Jesus' authority. The Gospel of Mark uses a bracketing technique in structuring the story. Within the passage, the exorcism is bracketed by reactions to Jesus' teaching and his authority. To understand the significance of the authority of Jesus in this story, it is important to understand the setting of the story. Jesus is in the synagogue. The synagogue was one of the two primary symbols to Jews of Jewish power. The other symbol was the temple in Jerusalem. Both politically and economically, Israel was under the dominance of Rome. The only area of genuine freedom was in their religion where, in essence, the Romans acquiesced to Israelite religious practices (for example, refusing to worship the emperor as divinity) in order to accomplish Rome's political and economic objectives. The religious institutions of Israel were expected to cooperate in maintaining Rome's dominance of Israel, but in return for that cooperation, they were granted considerable latitude in their religious practices. So, the synagogue was another symbol of domination in the time of Jesus. The rabbis and scribes who taught in those synagogues were co-opted by the Roman government. They were working hand in hand with the occupying powers. So, when we see Jesus entering into the synagogue we know that he had entered a sacred space, the symbol of Israel's systems arrayed against him. He entered it at a sacred time – the Sabbath gathering time for the people of Capernaum. Having entered the system's sacred space at its sacred time, Jesus immediately took charge of its proceedings and worked out of his authority that was given to him by God. Then we see the exorcism being an illustration of Jesus' work of liberation.

In his book, *Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Meyers writes, "The demon in the synagogue becomes the representative of the scribal establishment, whose "authority" undergirds the dominant Jewish social order. Exorcism represents an act of confrontation in the war of myths in which Jesus asserts his alternative authority. Jesus' healing ministry is thus portrayed as an essential part of his struggle to bring concrete liberation to the oppressed and marginal of Palestinian society... In the symbolic order of Judaism, illness was associated with impurity or sin, a state that meant exclusion from full status in the body politic... Mark's Jesus seeks always to restore the social wholeness denied to the sick/impure by this symbolic order. That is why his healing of the sick/impure is virtually interchangeable with is social intercourse with them... This is why Jesus the healer was a threat to 'civic order.'"

We tend to think of Jesus' going into the synagogue to teach as something that pleased everyone because we are on Jesus' side. But in reality Jesus' teaching was a major threat to the authority of the dominant religious leadership of his time. Their authority was compromised by their connection to the Roman government and their laws that excluded people. Jesus' authority was that of God's love that brought liberation and life to the oppressed. Biblical scholar Robert Linthicum says that Jesus' action "would be comparable to a stranger walking into one of our churches while worship was proceeding and simply taking over the conduct of that worship by beginning to preach the sermon! Outrageous!"

Jesus' authority is about the presence of God in him to bring healing into the world. Do we have access to that authority? What has authority in our lives? What inspires us? What challenges us? Do you have access to your own authority? How do you know what holds truth for you? Is there a core in your life that keeps you grounded even in the face of contradictions and different truths? Or are you swayed by every move or power that comes on the scene of your life and our world that promises you comfort and tranquility? Are you stuck in old ways that don't let you grow or heal?

We live in a time when questioning authority is a normal practice for us and rightly so. With this kind of orientation comes the illusion that nothing has power over us. We are all free and able to do whatever we want. Yet, in reality there are many things that have authority in our lives, both positive and negative. Take advertising for example. Most advertisers believe that "With the right strategy you can sell anything to anybody." In our culture, advertising has major authority even over our self image. Even when it comes to decisions about bigger issues, there are so many different voices out there that claim authority. For example, our economic situation right now and what to do about it has become a difficult issue to discern. Which voice should we believe? What authority voices are the true voices of wisdom? Even in personal matters, if you have a family conflict that you are facing, who do you listen to? If you are trying to decide what to do about your career, what guides you in the process?

So, how do we find authority in the midst of all of the authorities that clamor for our attention? Jesus faced the oppressive systems of his day with great authority because his authority was deeply rooted in his inner being. His life was grounded in God's love in such a way that enabled him to enter into the synagogue to face the systems of destruction head on without losing his own sense of being. The German Reformer Martin Luther was once asked, "Where will you be, Brother Martin, when church, state, princes, and people turn against you?" Answered Brother Martin, "Why then as now, in the hands of Almighty God." This is the kind of trust and authority that we need in life. It is not about getting more ideologies stuck into our heads. It is not about blindly following some doctrines handed down to us from above. It is about an inner quality of connection to God.

There's an old Native American story about a chief instructing some braves about the struggle within. "It is like two dogs fighting inside of us," the chief told them. "There is one good dog who wants to do the right and the other dog wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight." "Who is going to win in the end?" a young brave asks. "The one you feed," the chief answered. What I love about this story is not only its apparent wisdom but its recognition of the fact that we all have good and bad within us. Yet, most of the time, we often run away or deny our weaknesses, or even worse, we often battle within ourselves which dog to feed.

I think the first step for us in finding our inner authority that is deeply rooted in our relationship with God is to learn to embrace the contradictions of our lives so that they may be healed. We

are often swayed by different winds because we have not made peace with our own selves. Even though we may look confident on the outside, deep within us there is a sense of lack, a sense of insecurity that nags at us. There is a sense of inadequacy because we have not taken the time to find our inner peace, our inner wholeness. The Quaker teacher and writer, Parker Palmer writes, "I now know myself to be a person of weakness and strength, liability and giftedness, darkness and light. I now know that to be whole means to reject none of it but embrace all of it...When I started attending to my own truth, more of that truth became available in my work and my relationships...To embrace weakness, liability, and darkness as part of who I am gives that part less sway over me, because all it ever wanted was to be acknowledged as part of my whole self."

The invitation is to stop fighting or running away from our inner struggles. The invitation is to embrace them through the grace and authority of God's love. This is what gives us inner authority. This is what eventually helps us move to the place where actions and thoughts become more aligned with God's will in the world. This is also the foundation for our involvement in the world to be healers in our society. We come to the table this morning with our brokenness and our wholeness. We bring all of our lives to be redeemed and renewed by the power of the one who loves us beyond measure.

I would like to end with poem about the value of embracing our lives. It is called Love after Love by Derek Walcott:

The time will come  
when, with elation  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror  
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was your self.  
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored  
for another, who knows you by heart.  
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,  
peel your own image from the mirror.  
Sit. Feast on your life.

Resources Used:

French, Henry, ed. *40-Day Journey with Parker J. Palmer*, Augsburg Books, 2008.

Myers, Ched, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis Books, 1988.