



Sunday, January 31, 2021

Authority Figure

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

Psalm 111; Mark 1:21-28

"... He taught them as one having authority... "

Yellowstone National Park was visited during the winter of 1807-1808, by early explorer John Colter, who was a veteran of the Lewis and Clark expedition. After his time in the wilderness, Colter brought back his reports of Yellowstone, especially the geothermal areas. But few believed his fantastic stories. Colter's descriptions of "boiling mud," "spouting water," "steam coming from the ground," and "beautiful colored pools" were beyond imagination to the uninformed. So, his descriptions were labeled as "fictional entertainment" and the "ravings of a deranged man." It was not until the 1870s that reports of subsequent explorers, including paintings and photographs, convinced a skeptical public that what Colter had said more than a half century before was true. The challenge for Colter was, he knew whereof he spoke. He had been there. He had seen it with his own eyes. He could describe it in full detail. He knew the magnitude of it. And his desire was to convey all of these things to people who had not experienced it yet. This is a sign of a true leader. A true leader is able to speak with such boldness because he knows whereof he speaks.

That is the key to Christ's teaching. Jesus did not rely upon the expert advice of others, although He sometimes quoted the Old Testament, if it suited His message. He spoke of what He knew, to people who longed to hear it and to people who could scarcely believe it.

This passage reminds me of the first meeting I had with the Reverend Dr. Harold E. Scott, who was then the executive presbyter of Pittsburgh Presbytery. I suppose my meeting with him was like that of every new minister to the presbytery, because, at one point, he drew my attention to a painting on the wall of his office, there at 801 Union Avenue. The painting showed two people: one dressed in sumptuous robes, seated on a throne-like chair; the other dressed in the modest garb of an ordinary person. The man in the chair is listening. The man who is standing before him is speaking. The painting is about a church worker back from the mission field, reporting what he has seen and done. It is fair to say that both of those characters are authority figures — the one, because of his elevated position in the church; the other, because he has been there, serving in the real world on a daily basis, and knows whereof he speaks.

The church needs both kinds of authority figures. People who are leaders. People who are doers. It is best if the two attributes combine, because what one does on a daily basis has a tendency to inform one's understanding of worthy and important matters.

I wish I had a copy of Harold Scott's painting. I do not know the name of it; I do not know who painted it. But I am glad that he kept the thought of the importance of what is going on in the daily life of the Church and its members before him, and before his clergy, as he sought to lead the presbytery.

If we had been with Jesus in Capernaum that day, we would have seen something like that painting come to life before our eyes — first, hearing Him speak of what He knows; then, seeing Him heal the man with the unclean spirit. Both of these things pointed to Jesus having authority.

It is not happenstance that the healing happened on the heels of His teaching. It served to demonstrate what His listeners already sensed: that Christ has news to share from God that is authentic; that His message is true; that His insights are profound. Just as they were getting a sense of these things, up spoke the man with the unclean spirit:

"What have You to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are, the Holy One of God."

How do you think the one possessed knew that Jesus had such authority? Did he sense the threat to his condition by the very presence of Jesus? Did he know that Jesus has the power — the authority — to heal him and transform him? Does evil know — when goodness appears — that evil is doomed? In His teaching and in His healing, Jesus conveys truth — like John Colter back from Yellowstone, telling the truth about geysers that boiled and steamed; like the humble mission worker, back from the mission field, telling the church leader the realities of working and serving alongside God’s children.

Jesus arrived. And people were hearing the truth. Hearing the truth can be completely unsettling. Hearing the truth can be mystifying. Hearing the truth can upend that which we thought we knew to be true. Hearing the truth can be frightening. Hearing the truth can make us all angry at some point. Hearing the truth can change everything.

Alyce M. McKenzie (in *Edgy Exegesis*, Patheos, 2012) writes this: “When that which is sinful and unclean in our lives recognizes that Jesus is coming too close for comfort, we resist.”

“What have You to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us?”

Jesus does not answer that question in words. He answers that question in deeds — in that act of casting out the unclean spirit, the first instance of Jesus’ healing power that Mark records in his Gospel. Jesus did not come to destroy — Jesus came to transform and make whole; to provide hope to someone who had lost all hope; to give new strength to someone who had given up; to set the way straight; to make the sinful clean.

How do we know that Jesus has the authority to do this? The proof is in what He did then. And the hope in which we live is that, what Jesus did then, He will do again, and again — for all who are dealing with whatever unclean spirit has gotten hold of them.

Now we could easily scoff at such an idea in our twenty-first century, ultra-sophisticated world. “There are no new discoveries to be made, no unexplored Yellowstones yet to be revealed, no wonders or challenges of the natural or divine world. We have seen it all and done it all.” So we think.

I do not know about you, but I have noticed in this past year that we really have not seen or done it all. A year ago, we did not know that a pandemic was on our doorsteps. If I had been told that, I probably would have said in response, “Oh, that sort of thing happened one hundred years ago, and in various times before that, but we are beyond that ...”

How wrong I would have been — as wrong as the people who told John Colter his stories of Yellowstone were an idle tale. If the year we have just lived through has taught us anything at all, it has taught us that we still need Jesus to come alongside us, to speak truth, and to cast out whatever is unclean in us. We need Christ more than ever.

We all can attest to the presence and persistence of evil in our world in various guises. The good news from this passage is that our Lord revealed His authority in order to overcome the forces of evil, wherever we encounter them.

The authority of Christ brings freedom, at a number of levels. Jesus teaches and acts to bring people to the place where they can become what God made them to be.

We began with Christ in Capernaum. And that is where we will conclude, with a hymn text by my friend Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, titled “Christ, in Capernaum.”

*Christ, in Capernaum, people were awed by Your preaching.
You had authority many could hear in Your teaching.
In You they saw love that informed all their law,
Truth that was kind and far-reaching.*

*Into that place came a man who was troubled in spirit.
He cried aloud so the worshiping people could hear it.
Awe mixed with fear! God’s loving reign had come near!
Evil could simply not bear it.*

*Lord, You rebuked all that kept him from knowing God’s healing;
You countered evil with power that sent spirits reeling.
God has control! God wants our lives to be whole!
This was what You were revealing.*

*Still there is evil that tries to destroy and enslave us,
Still, by Your grace, we encounter Your power to save us.
You heal our pain, showing the joy of God's reign.
This is the teaching You give us!*

To God alone be the glory. Amen.