

“he taught them as one having authority.” (Mk 1:22)

I have a confession to make. I sometimes enjoy an old episode of *South Park*, you know, the sarcastic 1990s cartoon about 3rd graders in small-town Colorado. The worst character on the show, Eric Cartman, is a big insecure bully. In one episode, he dresses as a policeman and rides his bike down the road like a motorcycle with lights and sirens going off. He pulls over one of his friends' dads and gives him a speeding ticket. The adult challenges him by shaming him for just being a kid, but Cartman draws out a police baton, yells “I am a cop and you will respect my authoritah!”, and whacks away at the dad's legs. Classic slapstick humor, I guess. On the show, the word “authoritah”, with its Southern-like drawl, becomes a trade-word for Cartman, who obviously has no authority whatsoever: he is just a child, and a very violent one at that.

What is authority exactly? It's one of these words we throw around, but don't often stop to think about. We speak about “the authorities”, meaning government officials. Or we use it to describe an expert: “She's an authority on heavy metal rock.” We also use that word in a negative context, as with the adjective “authoritarian”, meaning a person or government who's very repressive and takes people's freedom away.

So what do the awestruck people in Capernaum mean when they say that Jesus is offering “a new teaching with authority”? That word, “authority”, actually comes back twice in today's short Gospel text. So, I would like to show you two things this morning: that having authority is a wonderful quality of Jesus, and that we, as his disciples, should also let God empower us with rightful authority.

Where does the English word “authority” come from? Well, it's related to other words we know, like “author”, as in “a book author”, but also to a fancier word, “augment”, meaning “increase”. In Latin, somebody with authority is someone who makes things or other people grow, like a farmer who's an expert at growing crops, or a parent who's really good at raising children, or a teacher who's remarkable at educating students. All these people have what can be called “true authority”. They increase and enhance whatever good they find in others, and remove all obstacles to make them grow strong and free. So, far from being a form of violence, true authority is a form of wisdom, strength, encouragement, and affirmation of others. A person with real authority never shows off or belittles others; they are transmitters and educators.

And I'll bet that all of us here, just like the folks in Capernaum, can recognize someone with true authority. Not the kind that comes through beating people up with a stick to make them respect you. Rather, the kind of encouragement and benevolence that makes you feel a

better, freer person. Think about it for a second: who are the beautiful figures of authority you have been graced to meet, people who have made you grow, who have affirmed you, formed you, and made you free and loving today?

Well, the people in Capernaum didn't have the New Testament to tell them that Jesus had a special kind of authority, but they knew it, they felt it in their bones. This man Jesus is just one of a kind: he has an inner fire, this power and wisdom he is able to transmit to others, just by his teaching. And as an extra sign of his authority, he can heal people and cast out demons. I hope that if we're in church this morning, that means we have experienced the saving authority of Jesus in our lives. Maybe he has freed us from a bad habit, an addiction, a compulsion over which we had no power; we might still struggle, but he helps us get back on track every time, affirming us, soothing us, teaching us, making us grow.

Now, "authority" in this Gospel passage has another special meaning. The Greek word that St. Mark used, *exousia*, means the power of choice, the freedom to do the right thing. So, the special kind of wisdom that Jesus shows through his words and deeds is the power to choose the right thing, to choose what will always make you free to love and be loved. Jesus knows how to discern and make the right decision to be a joyful, free, loving person. That's a truly wonderful gift, too.

Well, how about us? If we are true disciples of Christ, then, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can follow in Jesus' footsteps and acquire his authority. Of course, we're sinners. Of course, we don't always use authority the right way. But if we get to know and love Jesus in an intimate way, then he is more than happy to share with us his power to make others grow into free, caring people. Through our baptism, by listening to the Word of God, through the Eucharist and confession, through marriage and holy orders, we too can be vested with the wonderful, beautiful authority Jesus has.

And what a wonderful testimony that is, when our lives exhibit true, affirming authority for us and for others. When we know how to control ourselves, when we know how to say thank you or we're sorry, then we can help other people acquire the same wisdom, by the grace of God. This is what we do or should be doing as parents and grandparents, as teachers, priests, coaches, nurses, and so on, in every word and deed of ours that helps others grow.

Let us pray God the Father to make us aware of the authority he wants to vest in us, that we may share in the life-giving, loving authority of Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, to whom are due all glory and honor, for ever and ever. Amen.

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