

“And With Authority”

The people talked about that sermon until the last bite of Sunday dinner was digested. Until every fork was put away. Until Grandpa started his nap.

No one expected it, that’s for sure. There were two unexpected guests that day. I wonder if they knew each other was going to be there.

Jesus, now about 30 years old, has been baptized by John. He has recruited his first disciples, who helped him multiply the followers by telling family and friends about this man unlike any they had met, this Jesus.

But now it is the Sabbath, the first Saturday after these events. Jesus, raised up to be a faithful worshiper, and of course always desiring to be gathered with believers in the presence of his Father in Heaven, wouldn’t miss an opportunity to be in God’s house.

Still, in this little village where the itinerant band of fishers, now of men, not fish, the arrival of Jesus must not have been too remarkable. Few people had yet made the connection, that Jesus was the Messiah. So, when the head of the synagogue, as was the custom, asked their guest to be today’s teacher of God’s Holy Word, no one expected too much.

Until he started teaching. Perhaps from the minute he first opened his mouth they stopped looking at their fingernails, they stopped anticipating the Sabbath roast beast waiting at home, and they looked on in wonder.

It wasn't so much what he was saying as much as it was the way he said it. No, that's not quite it either. He spoke like his words were from God, divinely inspired, with the authority of heaven itself behind them. It was all very exciting. Who was this man, this new teacher?

And that brings us to the second surprise appearance of that Saturday morning. There was a man in the room. He wasn't the surprise guest. No, people knew the man. He lived among them, worshiped with them. Yet he was, well, different. Troubled. Unwell. No one could quite put their finger on it.

Then, in the middle of Jesus' teaching, the man screamed, and then he shouted:

“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24)

“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” (Mark 1:25)

And with that the man's spirit was calmed. The impure spirit which had been controlling him, his will, his life, was gone. So, the unwanted guest was cast

out; it hurried out, because the last place impurity wants to be is in the presence of Holy Purity, Jesus Messiah. Jesus came to cast out the impure, the evil, the devils of this world, and Jesus was going to win. The impure spirit knew it. Gone, like the wind.

What do you suppose happened next?

I imagine Jesus going up to the man, stricken with the emotional toll of being shaken by the impure spirit's departure, and Jesus embraced him. He whispered in his ear: "You are free. The Spirit of God has set you free. You are healed." Here is key to understanding Christian hospitality: Jesus throws out the impure spirit but welcomes the person, embraces the person.

And I imagine the man leaves the embrace of Jesus ready to learn who this man is, to return to his family and to start to live again.

Then I imagine the people gathered in synagogue that Sabbath, thinking how happy they are that they rolled out of bed that day to go to synagogue. Who would have anticipated what this day brought to their village? Soon everyone would be talking about it. No, about him. Not the healed man. Not the impure spirit. No, everyone would be talking about this Teacher with authority over spirits, this Jesus. His fame would be the death of him. (But that's another story.)

But what is most fascinating about this story, to me anyway, is that the only character in it who at this point professes to know that Jesus is the Son of God, the Promised One, the Messiah, the Christ, is the impure spirit.



So, I want to tread very carefully here. Let me say that I do not believe illnesses, physical or mental, are evidence of possession by an evil spirit. I don't believe they are a punishment or even a test from God. The God I read about in the Bible is just not that kind of a mean-spirited God. God is love.

But listen just as carefully to this, please. Let me say that I believe Satan, the Evil One, is real. I think the forces of evil are real, and we refuse to acknowledge the battle between good and evil at our own peril. The Bible clearly tells me this too.

Why then do I attribute this man's impure spirit to the Evil One? Because of the impure spirit's remark, confessing a knowledge of Jesus divine origin and authority and mission. Jesus came to cast our devils, the Bible tells. Here is Exhibit A. The battle lines are now formed. The battle would rage on until a Friday three years later when the legions of evil would think they had won as Christ was crucified.

As Tom Wright puts it, “...(The demons) can still shriek, but since Calvary they no longer have authority. To believe this is the key to Christian testimony and saving action in the world that, despite its frequent panic and despair, has already been claimed by the loving authority of God in Jesus.”

But then, as Christ shouted, “It is finished”, the enemy was defeated. The battle goes on, as if the forces of evil do not yet know they have lost. But they have lost. And on the Sunday after that Friday as the glory of Good arose, there was another shout, this time from the pure spirits, “Hallelujah!”, across the heavens.

I would like you then to retain this little story in your minds until Good Friday. I would like you to think for these next two months, when you arrive here, ‘I wonder if Jesus is going to show up today?’ But do not fear that an evil spirit will be here. No, they cannot invade the presence of God’s people today any more than they could on that first Sabbath after Jesus’ Epiphany.

But I want you to think about whether you see Jesus casting out the powers of darkness elsewhere too. You see, the church of Jesus Christ claims this same authority. Now, no human preacher, certainly not this one, can, nor should claim to preach with Christ’s divine power. But we do read to you that same words

Jesus taught, sing those beautiful words in hymns and songs of praise, lift up those healing words up in prayers, and even preached from this pulpit.

But what gives Jesus authority in the eyes of the people was not just his words in the Sabbath. It was that he put those words into action. That is the point, really of this strange encounter. Jesus was teaching all those who would come after him, don't just say my words, perform them.

Let your deeds of love and mercy, of feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, giving clothing to the cold, comfort to the distressed; let these actions be done in my name, Jesus says, and you will display for the world the amazing authority over the principalities and powers.

With each meal served to a hungry stomach, the enemy is defeated. With each room filled with a wandering family, the enemy is defeated. With each coat placed on cold arms, with each embrace of a weeping heart, the enemy is defeated; with each card written, each phone call made, each visit extended to a lonely or ill person, the enemy is defeated, not by our power, but by the authority of Jesus Christ, which fills Christ's Church; this church, if we will allow Jesus to show his authority here too.

The Wynveen Hope House is a way of us helping those facing defeat from an enemy they cannot control, not alone anyway. There is more work to be done, but if we can make that place a place where you would want to gather, then it will be a truly hospitable place. And when we do that who knows how else it might be used. What the Wynveen Hope House and Potter's Place persuade me of is the aphorism, "If you build it they will come." That is true of a baseball field in Iowa, but it is also true of the work that God invites us to join God in doing in this world, in whatever corner we are called to serve.

The Church in North America appears to be, and perhaps in reality is, in a weakened condition. If that is true, there is one reason underlying all the other reasons: we have forgotten what the authority of Jesus *looks* like.

When we add *action* to *information*, then, as one writer puts, 'our words are not just informative, but transformative.'

We offer a new teaching, *and with authority*, the authority of Jesus Christ who casts out devils, yes, but, more importantly, offers healing to people who cannot get up by themselves.

Genuine hospitality is a matter of offering to the people in our community the healing authority of Jesus Christ. It cannot be just words. It must be action too.



Then the world will again be amazed at this man, this Jesus, who alone has the authority to reach across the heavens down to earth to do the Father's will, gathering a community and sending it with his authoritative words of healing and hospitality to the sick, the distressed, the lonely, the ashamed, the guilty; in a word, to all who need to know Jesus.

Let us be a church which presents to all who will listen the Word, and with authority.