

## “ANSWER”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Mark 1:21-28 Feb. 3, 2018

Since we will be concluding the service today with Holy Communion, I though I would share a little story about a smart six-year-old. It's by Marian Holbrook from Traphill, North Carolina. She writes: “When my six-year-old visited our small country church for the first time, she was awed by the communion service. Accepting the bread and then the wine, she whispered excitedly to me, ‘Do we get cheese, too?’”

This Scripture reading from the Gospel of Mark is one of the lessons assigned for last Sunday, the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. As you will recall, last Sunday was our Celebration 2017 so I'm playing a little catch up today. Epiphany is an important season in the church year. It follows the twelve days of Christmas when we for twelve days celebrate the birth of the Incarnate One. And it extends for approximately seven or eight weeks until the season of Lent. And as you know, Lent begins very early this year with Ash Wednesday on Valentine's Day, Feb. 14<sup>th</sup>.

The word Epiphany itself means to be touched, to be made manifest. It comes from the same word as manual, manifestation, manual, to be touched by the hand. In our common language we often talk about being touched, to be deeply touched. We will refer to a person who's having mental or emotional problems as being out of touch. Epiphany season is when we reflect upon how we have been touched by the presence of God through the manifestation in Jesus Christ.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark informs us that this manifestation in Jesus was made through his teaching which was made with authority. Authority comes from the same word as author. It is a word that indicates some-

thing that creates, something that causes an increase. An authority is one who authors and there's two kinds of authority. There's the authority that comes with an office-- a judge, a president, a priest, has authority because by the law or the community's giving of the authority they have in their office the ability to influence, to increase, to cause to happen. But there's another kind of authority and that's an innate, an inside type of authority. Jesus spoke with authority.

Now the Old Testament reading for today is from Deuteronomy and in that lesson it says the Lord will raise up prophets. And as we look at the Old Testament, the prophets were people almost exclusively without office, not people of high rank, not high priests, not judges. They were farmers, they were vine-dressers, and the Spirit of the Lord came upon them and they were able to speak with authority, and the people listened.

In today's Gospel, Jesus has come to the synagogue in Capernaum and he has begun to teach the people. What amazes the people is that he teaches them as one who has authority and they realize he does not hold any office. He's not a member of the Sanhedrin. He's not a judge or a priest. And, yet, he speaks as one who knows the truth. We have a phrase that we often will use in our culture—it rings true. When Jesus speaks, people say, “Ah-hah.. ..yes, that's true, that's true about me.” How often in the scriptures did Jesus speak to a person and they would respond, “How did you know that about me?” When Jesus saw a person, he really saw the person. He was aware of who they were. He quite often knew them better than they knew themselves so Jesus had this amazing authority not because of any office that he held or any degrees that he'd been given. He had a unique sense of authority.

As people of faith, for two thousand years we have come to understand

that this authority in the person Jesus is uniquely powerful because it is related to God. St. Paul says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” Even the centurion at the time of the crucifixion, who had probably never seen or heard Jesus before, is so filled with awe and wonder at this man as he dies that he says, “Truly, this was a godly man.” And Thomas, who like most of us, cannot really believe until we have strong evidence, when he is able to touch, and, notice, when he was able to touch, when he is able to touch the manifestation of God’s presence, he says, “My Lord and my God.” Jesus spoke with authority and, as believers, we see that authority rooted in his relationship with God, the Creator. We are in Jesus touched by the divine.

So how do we relate this understanding of Jesus speaking with authority to our daily lives? Because each one of us has some innate authority. We all have influence, upon family, friends, neighbors. How do we use our authority? And, secondly, how do we live under authority? What authorities influence us? Now some authorities are given. If we live in this nation, we live under the authority of the constitution and the laws of this nation. We live under the authority of the Internal Revenue Service. Various authorities influence and impact our lives, but many of the authorities under which we live are chosen. I have chosen to be married. I live under the vows of marriage. I have chosen to be baptized. I live under the covenant of the baptism. I have chosen to accept an appointment as a licensed local pastor for the United Methodist Church. I live according to my vows and the Book of Discipline.

We almost all have various heroes and models that influence our lives. Media is full of influential people who have an impact upon common life.

An article recently in a newspaper was talking about advertising.

And the article said, “With the right strategy you can sell anything to anybody.” In our culture, advertising has major authority, major influence upon how individual people live their lives. Some of us even turn our lives over to addiction. An addiction, whether it’s to drugs or alcohol or to nicotine, is when we allow that drug or that substance to have great authority, great influence upon our lives.

So do we need to look at under what authorities do we live? The authorities under which we live will greatly determine how we use our own lives as an authority in the lives of others. So today as we meditate on Jesus and the authority with which he spoke, let’s ask ourselves, “What authorities rule my life?” Is it money? Is it family? Is it my job, my boss? What is the highest authority if we are honest with ourselves?

Most of us would not like to admit it, but money will be very, very high on the list, higher than we would like to admit. As we’ve often said in political campaigns, “It’s the economy, stupid!” Money is a powerful authority in the lives of all Americans. So if we look at our own list perhaps we need to decide how we need to change the list? What is it in that list that makes me uncomfortable? If money is above my own family, that should make me very uncomfortable. And then we should probably ask ourselves secondly, “How do I use my authority with my family, in my workplace, in my neighborhood? Do I use my influence to control people, to frighten people? Do I use it to raise up people when they’re lost or weak? Do I use my authority to support and affirm other people?” And thirdly, what does it mean or what might it mean for me to accept Jesus as a primary authority in my life? Using the words of the prayer book, what would it mean to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior?

Millions of persons for two thousand years have found their lives

radically changed for the good by accepting Jesus Christ as their primary authority. The question then might be, “Well, I’d like to have Jesus as my primary authority. How do I make that happen?”

First, we must make a decision. I must accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. That’s a very deeply personal decision. And I may well need to make that decision a number of times during my life, not just once. Secondly, and this is very important in an individualistic culture like America, I must become an active member of a Christian community, a church. The spiritual journey is more than just God and me. At baptism, Christians promise to support one another. We are a people in communion with God and with one another. Notice in today’s Scripture reading Jesus is teaching not just one on one; he’s teaching to a group of people gathered in community.

Let’s look for a moment at the importance of what it means to live in community. Having made the decision to accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, living in community, living with my brothers and sisters in Christ, is crucial to the spiritual journey. When the church gathers, and for most of us most often that means on Sunday morning, we come together from our various walks of life, and notice how in almost all churches, we begin this Sunday morning ritual with memory work. We hear the scriptures read. We remember. In fact, notice how often in church gathered the word remembrance or remembering is used. We are a people gathering together to remind ourselves who we are. Memory work is in a sense identity work.

If you’ve ever met a person with amnesia, they may be functioning beautifully. They may be talking, they may be laughing, they may have a perfect heart rate, but they will not be able to tell you who they are. Memory is the source

of identity. The church gathers together to do memory work, to remember how it is they have come to know the presence of God in ages past. We read from the Old Testament more than two thousand years ago. We read from the New Testament. We sing hymns that have been written over the last two thousand years, It's the church gathered together doing its memory work, reminding ourselves of the many ways in which God has been made manifest to human beings over the ages. That gives us a sense of God's authority spoken through these many manifestations

Then having done the memory work, we offer ourselves, our souls to God. This is who we are. Today's gospel shows us Jesus teaching people gathered together. The decision to accept Jesus as the primary authority in my life is an individual decision but the spiritual journey to make that authority real is a community journey. So I would urge us as we meditate upon this powerful reading from the Gospel of Mark to ask ourselves the question about authority and how incredibly important authority is in our everyday lives. How do I use the authority that I have? We actually have much more authority than we believe. Many of us are prone to say, "I don't have any influence. I don't have any authority." Yes, you do. You have major authority upon the people you live with, your neighbors, your family, your friends, you fellow workers, the people you know and meet on the street. How do I relate my personal authority to the authority of God as made manifest in the person of Jesus? We believe that God has touched us through the person of Jesus Christ, made us aware of the divine presence. Think about how you accept that divine word and how it affects your daily action. What's your answer?

Let me close this morning with the spoken word by Taylor Burton-Edwards:

*Sometimes you're just too much for me,*

*Your light, too bright,*

*Eyes burn to see your face,  
Your grace consumes my soul like fire.  
Don't blaze, these days darkness is a friend to me,  
Shadows shelter,  
Make a home for me,  
God, your gaze is more than I can stand.*

*So turn away, don't look at me,  
Yet draw near in holy mystery,  
Come, Lord, and release me from this strife.*

*I want to follow where you lead,  
Your prophet's voice I'll surely heed,  
Spirit, speak, disturb my soul to life.*

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Please pray with me. May God in Christ be powerfully present in our lives. May the divine presence be made manifest through the words of Jesus the Christ. May Jesus be the primary authority under which we each live and may our authority with others be a source of growth and joy for them and for each of us. May we answer God's call to us for discipleship with a strong "Yes! Lord, I will follow where you lead. Your will be done in my life," We pray this is Christ's holy name. Amen.