

North Kildonan United Church

31st January 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“As One with Authority”

Deuteronomy 18: 15-20

Psalms 111

Mark 1: 21-28

Guide us, O God, by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority. (Mark 1:21-22)

What does it mean to have authority? Some of you might be familiar with *South Park*, an adolescent and adult geared cartoon usually broadcast later in the evening. Some people really like it while others are quite turned off by its content and storyline. When I would remember I might have watched it but after doing away with cable TV a number of years ago the temptation never arises.

One of the characters of *South Park* is Cartman, an aggressive, arrogant bully. His rudeness knows no end. But he is a teenager, the alpha dog in a pack of teenagers he hangs around with, and in some ways he is more to be pitied than condemned.

The only memorable aspect of Cartman for me is when he would pretend to be in charge and would declare: "*respect my authoritah*", which was usually followed by him hitting someone with a stick.

"*Respect my authoritah*". Cartman is not the only character who demands obedience through the use of power. From the comparative safety of being north of the 49th parallel we in Canada have witnessed the chaos our neighbours to the South have endured for the past four years. If there was ever an embodiment of Cartman in human form it was their former president, and thank God he is gone.

Putting that observation aside, how might we understand authority?

R. P. C. Hanson, in his entry on Authority in [A New Dictionary of Christian Thought](#) offers this, in part.

"It is useful to divide authority into external and internal authority. External authority is that attaching to a person as an official or to an office as an office. When someone obeys a policeman who asks him or her not to park in a certain place it is not the intrinsic conviction of the policeman's words that counts but his holding office as a guardian of the law.

Internal authority is the authority residing in convincing argument or weighty moral or spiritual example or experience. If a woman buys a product advertised on television, for instance, it is the authority of the words and actions of the advertiser which has moved her. The authority of a bishop is an example of external, and the authority of a writer or a saint is that of internal, authority. In the New Testament almost all authority is internal."

Internal authority was obviously what was recognized by those marvelling at Jesus's teaching in the synagogue. There was something about his content, his viewpoint, his approach to scripture that was refreshingly different from what was usually heard.

In those days, when a scribe or rabbi taught, they usually quoted someone else, perhaps a bit like the way I quoted Professor Hanson just a few moments ago. They might begin an interpretation by saying: "*Rabbi Ezra says this but Rabbi Hillel says that about this passage of Torah...*" Their sermon, their teaching was basically safe but not particularly inspiring.

So when Jesus began to teach, it was like the windows and doors were opened and in came refreshing, invigorating breezes.

But Mark is presenting Jesus as more than an inspired teacher with some clever preaching skills. His authority would also be shown in the miracles he performed, the signs and wonders that illuminated his message that the Kingdom of God was near.

In this, the first miracle Mark records, an ill man desperately needs healing. Mark describes the man as having an unclean spirit within him, corrupting the poor man's life. This spirit is able to recognize Jesus for who Jesus really is as he calls out: "*Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*" Jesus orders the spirit to shut up and depart, which it did. The text tells us nothing more about the ill man, in fact the focus of this part of the gospel is the interaction between Jesus and the unclean spirit.

It's interesting to note that in this account it's an outsider, the unclean spirit, who sees Jesus for who Jesus really is. The religious congregation in the synagogue are amazed but they make no statement other than Jesus seems to have some special powers to exorcise unclean spirits. Throughout this gospel Mark will downplay the description of Jesus as the Holy One, the Son of God. Mark will want people to come to faith in Jesus by hearing his teachings and seeing his miracles, not because Jesus is claiming to be divine. This is a very different approach from the one we find in John's gospel, for instance, which is why it is so good that we have four gospels, each providing their perspective of the story of Jesus.

So we are still in the first chapter of Mark, and after this synagogue incident word starts to spread about Jesus. Interestingly enough, those who witnessed this incident don't seem to be all that moved. Sure they are amazed, but then a good fireworks display

can also be amazing. No one from the synagogue seems to suggest anything extraordinary about Jesus, other than asking *"What is this?"* The question is more *"Who is this?"* a question that will stay with us throughout this gospel. A question that stays with us throughout our life with Christ.

Jesus spoke with authority, he spoke with honesty and compassion. His words are words of hope and love and wisdom, words that shape our lives, words which inspire us to walk in his way.

And always, always, his words, our words, are words of truth.

I want to share with you an email I recently received but it raises the question, do you want the truth or a good story? In this account, a story about Thomas Edison, truth and a good story are combined together to make a point perhaps more significant than just accuracy.

"One day, as a small child, Thomas Edison came home from school and gave a paper to his mother. He said to her "Mom, my teacher gave this paper to me and told me only you are to read it. What does it say?"

Her eyes welled with tears as she read the letter out loud to her child ...

"Your son is a genius. This school is too small for him and doesn't have good enough teachers to train him. Please teach him yourself."

Many years after Edison's mother had died, he became one of the greatest inventors of the century.

One day he was going through a closet and he found the folded letter that his old teacher wrote his Mother that day. He opened it ...

The message written on the letter was *"Your son is mentally deficient. We cannot let him attend our school anymore. He is expelled."*

Edison became emotional reading it and then wrote in his diary:

"Thomas A. Edison was a mentally deficient child whose mother turned him into the genius of the Century."

A positive word of encouragement can help change anyone's destiny."

A good, moving story, if not completely factual.

In 1907, Edison gave this account of his education in a newspaper interview:

"One day I overheard the teacher tell the inspector that I was "addled" and it would not be worthwhile keeping me in school any longer. I was so hurt by this last straw that I burst out crying and went home and told my mother about it. Then I found out what a good thing a good mother is. She came out as my strong defender. Mother love was aroused, mother pride wounded to the quick. She brought me back to the school and angrily told the teacher that he didn't know what he was talking about, that I had more brains than he himself, and a lot more talk like that. In fact, she was the most enthusiastic

champion a boy ever had, and I determined right then that I would be worthy of her and show her that her confidence was not misplaced."

One of the most prolific and ingenious inventors of all time, Thomas Edison would be homeschooled until he set out on his own at the age of sixteen, openly grateful for his mother's support and education throughout his life.

Perhaps the most truthful and hopeful part of that video is the concluding sentence: *"A positive word of encouragement can help change anyone's destiny."*

And the most powerful sentence from Edison's account: *"Then I found out what a good thing a good mother is."*

Combine the two sentences and there is an even more profound truth to be discovered.

And now for something completely different and totally fictional.

The Pope and a Rabbi were having a debate. The loser would leave Italy. The rabbi spoke no Italian, and the Pope spoke no Yiddish, so it would be a 'silent' debate. [SEP]

The Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. The rabbi looked back and raised one finger. The Pope waved his finger around his head. The rabbi pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope brought out a communion wafer and a chalice of wine. The rabbi pulled out an apple. With that, the Pope stood up and declared the rabbi the winner.

The Pope explained, *"I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He held up a single finger to remind me there is still only one God. I waved my finger around my head to show that God was all around us. He pointed to the ground to show that God was also right here.*

I pulled out the wine and wafer to show that God absolves all our sins, and he pulled out an apple to remind me of the original sin. He bested me; I could not continue."

The Rabbi explained, *"First, he told me that we had three days to get out of Italy, so I gave him the finger. Then he tells me that the whole country would be cleared of Jews and I told him that we were staying right here."*

"And then what?" asked a woman. *"Who knows?"* said the rabbi. *"He took out his lunch so I took out mine."*

Amen.