

Homily for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

1 Corinthians 7:32-35

Mark 1: 21-28

Jesus, a young rabbi from Nazareth,
stands up in the synagogue at Capernaum to speak and teach -
and then casts out an unclean spirit in a possessed man.
“What is this?” the synagogue members ask.
And they answer their own question:
“A new teaching – with authority!”

Had we been there would our response have been the same?
Would we have recognized and welcomed
the authority of Jesus’ teaching
and his authority over whatever has a hold on us:
perhaps not an unclean spirit, but whatever it might be
that holds our hearts hostage and in need of healing?

We live in a time, in a culture often suspicious of any authority
beyond the personal authority of the self.
Over the past 50 years, we’ve moved from
upholding and respecting institutional authority as beyond questioning
towards a reverence of the self
as the primary arbiter of truth and morality.

The authority of a social order based on love of God, nation and family,
(rooted in church, patriotism and tradition)
has largely given way to a society struggling to defend
every individual’s supposed right to personal autonomy and authority -
and this is often at the expense of the common good
and with serious consequences for the rights of the most vulnerable.

But rather than wonder how we might have responded
to the authority of Jesus’ new teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum
we might look at how we respond to the authority of Jesus’ teaching
newly announced, every week, here in our church in Concord center.

So, a few questions to ponder...

- What authority do we give Jesus over our own authority?
over our own decisions and choices?
- What authority do we give Jesus over what takes hold of us:
the weaknesses, desires and habits that possess our hearts?
- What authority do we give to Jesus teachings over our marriages?
our ministry? our families? how we raise our children?

how we pastor a parish?

- What authority do we give to Jesus' teachings over how we exercise our individual rights as citizens and our participation in our nation's democratic process?
- What authority do we give Jesus over our possessions: over how we get what we have? how we use what we have? how we share what we have?

There are many such questions for us to ask and not the least of them would be a question about the authority of the Church in our lives. Catholic Christians acknowledge the authority of Jesus not only in the scriptures and in a personal relationship with him but also through the communion of the Church, Christ's body, and through the teachings of the Church.

That the strength of the Church's authority has suffered from the sea change in the cultural climate is a given and that has only been exacerbated by any ways in which the Church has compromised its own authority through its words and deeds.

But let us not miss the importance of the scene in today's gospel. It's in the synagogue, in the house of prayer where the rabbis teach, that the authority of Jesus is revealed, recognized and received.

Yes, Jesus preached by the seashore and on hillsides but his authority did not estrange itself from his own religious institution which was not without its problems and divisions. Jesus did not ignore the religious authority of his time: he engaged and challenged it.

But this is not 1st century Capernaum: this is 21st century Concord.

The first question we may need to ask is this:
will you and I submit to an authority greater than our own?

How can you and I work to balance the value of personal authority with an authority greater than our own?

What authority do you and I recognize, respect and reverence?

Will we invite the teaching of Jesus, and of his Church:
- to speak with authority to our hearts and minds?
- to have authority over realities that hold us hostage

to ideology, to creature comfort, to the self?

As surely as Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Capernaum,
he stands among us and speaks to us in the scriptures
and joins us at the altar where, in the Eucharist,
we acknowledge him as the *Holy One of God*.

Through the power of his Spirit
and with the authority of the Cross,
the authority of his sacrificial love,
Jesus is revealed and revered in the bread and cup of our table.

May the Holy One we receive here
have authority over our minds and hearts
and make us one with his body, the Church.

- *Rev. Austin Fleming*