



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, January 21, 2018

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

THE REV. CHARLES WITKE

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 | Psalm 62:6-14 | 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 | Mark 1:14-20

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Like all the evangelists, St. Mark had many gifts. Sadly, taking dictation was not one of them. Mark records that at the outset of Jesus' ministry, he visited the town of Capernaum, a couple of day's journey on foot from his home in Nazareth. It would become the base for his operations in Galilee. Jesus performed many miracles there and gained a popular following. He also preached his first synagogue sermon in Capernaum. Mark tells us that the people were "astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

What were the contents of that teaching? No one knows for sure. Mark didn't write it down, or whoever told Mark about this inaugural sermon didn't write it down, or even make notes. It was good. That's what they remembered. It wasn't the same old thing, like you would hear from the scribes, the usual Sabbath preachers. They did little more than string together a bunch of quotes from Hebrew scripture and rehash old commentaries on those passages.

Jesus was different. While he read from the same Bible as the scribes, his message was new, timely, or to employ an overused term: relevant. What he said mattered, and people listened. Without the use of force, with no flash of wealth, with no spin doctors to pave the way, Jesus got people's attention. He spoke with an authority that came from within himself, that was his -- self. Such integrity is rare. Jesus had it, as did Moses and some of the prophets of old, and even a few individuals closer to our own time. What would an ambitious politician, business person, celebrity, or religious leader do to acquire and hold on to such perceived power, such personal authority, to make their words golden? Some would do just about anything, perhaps even sell their soul. Ancient and modern history is littered with such delusional bargains.

But such authority cannot be bought; it can't be manufactured, or even spun. True authority comes from within, from a soul that knows itself and knows its dependence on God -- what the Psalmist calls "the fear of the Lord," or being "poor in spirit" a state which Jesus commends in his Sermon on the Mount. Those teachings recorded in three-chapters by St.

Matthew end with the same observation as Mark's unrecorded sermon: that Jesus spoke with authority.

Of course, Jesus did more than talk. Talk is cheap. He put his words into action, usually before the sound of them left the air. In the Capernaum synagogue, he relieved a man of his mental and spiritual anguish. Coming down from the Mountain in Matthew's gospel, Jesus cures a case of leprosy. Luke uses the miracles to validate Jesus' words. But these are more than mere proofs; they are testaments to a reality that Jesus' words, his actions, his life and death, matter. It would have been hard for anyone looking for meaning and purpose, beyond themselves, not to notice him.

So, where did all that power, all that authority, go? Did it fly back to heaven with the ascended Christ? Did it dwindle down to a mere flicker after the explosive experience of Pentecost and the early apostolic missions, only to flare up from time to time? Or is this authority just waiting to be claimed, waiting for those who know themselves and know their need for God, to speak and act?

One of the pitfalls of reading the Bible, especially stories like this one, is to read as if that was 'then,' but this is 'now'; and things 'now' are different. That's nonsense. Like the people in Capernaum, we can hear the same old thing from religion, from the government, from markets and the media, all with something to sell or impose on us, all struggling to find a voice that will rise above the chatter, leaving us yearning for a voice with authority.

But what of our own voice, our own authority? By virtue of our baptism and our faith in Christ, as people nourished by Word and Sacrament, as recipients of Christ's love who are called to be living symbols of that love in the world, we, each of us individually and as a parish church, has the authority of Christ. Every time we love in his name we make Christ present in real time and space. That's a very different mode of authority than we usually encounter. The authority of Christ is not based in a play for power or profit, but in a desire to give of his very being, not to grab for whatever he can get. The world would call that, 'failure.' Jesus calls it freedom. He uses his authority, not to put us under his thumb, but to

free us to become the people God intended us to be. What he asks of us is to look within ourselves, to the love he has planted there in the gift of himself, and let our words and actions flow from that. Which you have done in this place through your gifts of your substance, your passions, your time and concern. Christ, and his love, is made real here and beyond these walls.

While we have much to celebrate, our work is not over. How can the work of love ever be over? It must be renewed every day. Before we let that thought overwhelm us with exhaustion, remember that this work is not dependent solely on us, but on the one who has given us himself.

The question for us is how invested do we want to be. We have the power and the means to be instruments of God's love. We also have the power and the means not to be. Christ hasn't asked us to overthrow empires, nor build new ones. He hasn't asked us to spend ourselves trying to right every wrong. He hasn't asked us to do for others anything more than we would want for ourselves. What Christ has asked us to do is to love, as he loves. If we can do that we will have accomplished many of those other things, too. We can make Christ present in the world. He has given us the authority to do that.

Now, what will we do with it?