

First Presbyterian Church  
Cheyenne, Wyoming  
February 1, 2009  
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: Authorizing Power of God  
Psalm 111, Mark 1:21-28

Last week, we talked about this time of year as being the Christian church season of Epiphany which highlights "the revelation of the divine nature of Jesus," or, of Jesus as God's "Champion of all Champions." This week we learn that the Christian church season of Epiphany is also a time when the church reflects on the authority of God, God's command, God's purpose, and God's promise.

Now, some people have a problem with the authority of God or maybe it is with the word authority itself. It can give the feel of someone or something having power over us which we most often do not like to experience. When the name, God, is thrown into the mix of authority and power it can become worse. To some people it may seem that God is some sort of tyrant using his authority as a power over us to command us to do things against our will. It is true at times that God uses his authority and power to move us to do things we do not want to do, but those things are good for us. God uses his authority and power in many different ways, but never as a tyrant. Today's scripture lessons give wonderful insights on how God really uses his authority as a power to work for our benefit.

Before we dive into what today's scriptures say about God's authority and power, I want to share how a man named "Tom Ehrich, in the 'On a Journey E-Newsletter,'" helps to clarify "the distinction between power and authority," especially in the context of God. "Power is the ability to impose one's will on others, whereas authority seeks the will of God. Power seeks benefits — wealth, comfort, privilege, sovereignty, for ourselves — whereas authority gives away benefits to others.' He goes on to contrast the big differences between the two: 'Power seeks to win; authority risks losing. Power controls; authority liberates. Power deploys fear; authority builds confidence. Power punishes; authority forgives. Power diminishes people; authority trusts people.'" If we can understand these distinctions we can see that God's authorizing power is used for our benefit. "Emphasis," January/February 2006

The Psalmist certainly experienced God's authorizing power being used for our benefit. He appreciated it so much that he praised God and gave "thanks to God with his whole heart." The authorizing power of God is evidenced in the psalm as "being faithful and beneficent, providing all that is needed for healthy, joyous living." Or, as in Ehrich's definitions, God's authority — "gives away benefits." God does great works and wonderful deeds that demonstrate his grace, his unconditional love, and his mercy. God provides food for his people who are faithful to him. God never forgets his promises or covenant, he is his word. God redeems his people from their sins and troubles even when they do not deserve it. The authority of God forgives and is just and fair. God gives laws that show us healthy ways in which to live. The Psalmist ends his song of praise to God's authorizing power with, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise

endures forever.” Or to put this is the modern vernacular, the awe of God or the respect of God and the benefits he gives away “is the beginning of wisdom....” [Texts For Preaching—Year B](#), pg. 125

Have you ever been in awe of a sunset, a mountain valley scene, of someone’s singing or athletic ability, or an act of unselfish love shown by another human being or even an animal? Have you ever fallen in love and been in awe of the person to whom you direct your love? Does all this not lead to praise coming from our lips? Do we not give ourselves in some way to this event, place or person because of the benefits it brings to us? If we can surrender like this in response to something of this world, even more shall we seek to submit to the will of the awesome God who creates, redeems and loves us! This is just a portion of the benefits the authorizing power of God brings to us and causes us to be in awe of him, and wisely so.

In the gospel lesson, we see this authority, this authorizing power of God and its benefits raised to an even greater level when Jesus “commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” Jesus had been going about the area around the sea of Galilee “with fierce intensity, preaching, teaching, healing, and casting out demons.” He and the disciples “went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.” The people there “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, ‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.” Talk about using one’s authority and power for the benefit of others!

In this healing, Jesus demonstrated that he was the Lord or the authority over the sabbath to our benefit. Jewish rules at that time forbid healing on the sabbath, but Jesus was not to be limited by this human rule and deny this man healing. In those days, if you were ill it was thought that you had sinned and were being punished by God. This is not mentioned here, but it probably was on the minds of those present. So, in healing the man Jesus used his authority and power to forgive the man’s sins, if the sins were in fact holding back the man from being healed. Jesus declared his authority and power over the unnamed illness or demon in the man. He cast it out. He used his authorizing power to liberate the man. More importantly he revealed his authority and power over the kingdom of evil and declared the end of its dominion over humanity. The Kingdom of God had indeed arrived in the one who is the Lord, the authority and the power in God’s kingdom.

The irony is that the only one present that truly recognized who Jesus was and the authority and power he had was the demon. “‘I know who you are, the Holy One of God,’ it declared with awe in its voice.” “‘Oh, all the people were amazed and they kept on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’” But, only the awestruck demon truly recognized who Jesus really was and the authority and power he had over him and the rest of this world.

This might be a good time to stop and ask ourselves who Jesus is to us and what authority and power he has over our lives. Hope College Professor, Wayne Brouwer,

writes that he thinks of these questions every time he teaches a college course called "Which Jesus?" "I take my students through Jaroslav Pelikan's book, Jesus through the Centuries (Yale, 1999) and the writings of the New Testament. Using these materials as starting points, we reflect on the variety of ways in which people have thought about Jesus and continue to reflect on him. The major assignment I give is for each student to write a paper which requires that they talk with their parents about how Mom and Dad view Jesus." (A great idea for a family activity). "Invariably, I get some papers still wet with tears from students who never before knew the Jesus of their parents' religious devotions. Too long the students had passed by one another snickering at the religious folly of others while never having to face the question of Jesus' identity" and his authority and power over their lives themselves."

The Gospel writer, "Mark, wants his readers to face this same challenge early in their encounter with Jesus through his gospel. They may dislike the man. They may revile him. They may try to suck up to him or wheedle him like some magical genie. But ignore him they may not do. Otherwise even the demons will cry out in awe-filled recognition" of Jesus and his authority and power. "Emphasis," January/February, 2009

Let's get back to asking ourselves who Jesus is to us and what authority and power he has over our lives? Using Tom Ehrich's "distinction between power and authority" as a guide might help us answer these questions with a few more pointed questions. Jesus often answered questions with a question. In response to God in Jesus Christ, do we place our faith in him with the goal of gaining power so that we might have the ability to impose our will on others, or do we by faith surrender to his authority in order to seek the will of God? Do we try to use the power of Jesus' name to seek benefits, such as wealth, comfort, privilege, and sovereignty for ourselves, or will we follow his authority in order to share his benefits to others? Do we try to manipulate Jesus' power so that we present ourselves as superior beings, and thereby diminish others by considering them to be losers, or are we willing to submit in complete trust to his authority and risk losing everything for his sake? Do we teach and live the power of God in Jesus Christ in order to fill ourselves and others with the fear of a punishing God of hellfire and damnation or are we in awe of God in Jesus Christ and his authority to forgive us, liberate us, build us up, and give us confidence to teach and live the good news of his saving power? Like the man in the temple, are we willing to come to Jesus so that our demons and their demonic power inside us shall be cast out by his awesome authority as the Holy One of God so that we might find peace and healing within ourselves and with others? How shall we answer these questions?

Today's scriptures and the authorizing power of our awesome God have given us a lot to wrestle with over our relationship to God in Jesus Christ, to others and ourselves. Where shall we begin to deal with all of this? How about at a quiet meal with Jesus where he gives his all, his body and his blood to wipe away our sins, cast out our demons, stop our abuses of power; and where he promises to be with us forever, so that by his grace he shall help us work it all out. As the Holy One of God, he has the authority to do all of this and more. "Praise God for he has sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name."

