

The freedom to care for others (4B) (1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28)

Perhaps Paul can help our anti-mask congregants recognize authority—or at least common sense.

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As this episode of the Gospel of Mark opens in Capernaum, Jesus arrives in town, gets to the sabbath, then simply enters the synagogue and teaches. There's no setting the scene, no detail about him being invited to speak, no background about being a son of the congregation. Jesus just enters the synagogue and teaches. Boom!

But it's not just the rapid-fire action of travel through territory, time, and the door of the synagogue that gives this episode verve; it's the description of the reaction to his teaching: "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

Like our congregations, I suspect, the congregation in Capernaum was full of people who'd heard it all before yet gathered faithfully to hear it again. On this day, they'll hear something new. Yet what strikes them is less what they hear than the way they hear it. They are *astounded* at Jesus' teaching, because of the way he teaches: with authority.

Their astonishment at Jesus' authority comes before the moment of high drama when even those in the realm of spirit recognize that authority, recognize Jesus' true identity. Even as this episode closes, that power over the unclean spirits remains secondary to the astonishment at Jesus' teaching and its authority. He is so unlike

their scribes.

This hits a little close to home. Like many pastors, I suspect, I currently feel a bit like a scribe—like one who teaches without authority. The ongoing “mask wars” in our congregations, and the dismissal and even contempt for any cleric’s attempt to urge caution, make it clear that parishioners’ views of those with titles—pastor, bishop, scribe—haven’t changed much.

My hope would be that our congregants, like those in Capernaum, could see more clearly, even dramatically, how the hard work of pastors, like Jesus, directly confronts the unclean spirits; how in their insistence on masks, social distancing, and the like, they are casting out the unclean-spirit-like curse of COVID that might afflict the very ones who question their authority.

Perhaps it’s Paul, along with Jesus, who can help those congregants recognize authority, or at least common sense and their pastor’s deep care for their well-being. Paul writes to a congregation of people at Corinth as committed to freedom as are so many in our pews, a people who know their rights and want to exercise them.

Paul’s letter has just advised people to change their relationships with possessions, wealth, the culture, even other people. Living by the priorities of the coming reign of God, such relationships are secondary. Paul turns now to stress a relationship that is primary—the relationship with others in the community of faith.

Paul is discussing food sacrificed to idols, but he could as easily be discussing face masks and social distancing. Just as it is the Corinthians’ knowledge of their faith-found freedom that is the problem in Corinth, so it is our members’ knowledge of the lore-loving liberty of their constitutional rights that is the problem in the mask wars.

Paul turns such knowledge on its head, saying that those who use it to justify their actions don’t really have knowledge—aren’t really exercising liberty. Instead, Pastor Paul might say, *we know that individual liberty puffs up, but love builds up*. He goes on to describe how voluntary sensitivity to the neighbor in love is the experience of true freedom. He might even quote Luther’s *Freedom of a Christian*: “The Christian is the perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. The Christian is a perfectly dutiful subject of all, servant to all.”

Given the free choice to practice precautions, even those whose necessity we question, choosing to practice them for the sake of the neighbor is the truest

exercise of freedom, the most powerful expression of authority.

What is this? A new teaching?

No. It is the old, old teaching of the way of the cross, the path to resurrection. It is nothing less than the authority, the liberty, of the gospel.