

“The Authority that Frees” – Epiphany 4B
Rev. Jennifer Adams, Sunday 02/01/09

This Sunday is the fourth in the season of Epiphany, the season which focuses in lots of different ways on the revelation of God in Christ. And so all of the stories we hear this season involve some sort of recognition that this man, Jesus is also the Son of God, the Messiah or at least someone worth watching and following and wondering what he’s all about because he just might be that One they’ve been waiting for. We started the season with the story of the wisemen who followed the star to see the One whom they believed had come from God for the whole world. Then there was Jesus’ baptism when the Spirit came down upon him and a voice from heaven announced Jesus to be the “beloved of God.” We heard about the calling of the disciples about Philip spreading the word and Nathanael’s change of heart and in last Sunday’s gospel Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee and invited Simon and Andrew and then James and John to follow him - - And they did – They saw something, or hoped something, or started to believe something about this man; and they dropped their nets and they followed him.

Now in this week’s gospel passage we hear that Jesus was in the synagogue in Capernaum; it was the Sabbath and again people were seeing and experiencing something different, something that made them listen differently or that made them wonder what was going on with this guy. They were “astounded” the story says, because Jesus was teaching with authority, “not like the scribes,” they said. So, there must have been something people caught right away, something about his presence or his way of communicating that got their attention or opened them up in new ways to things they had probably been hearing all of their lives. And then when someone who was “possessed with an unclean spirit” cried out, and Jesus responded by healing the man, and the people were not only “astounded” but “amazed” and said to one another that what was happening there was definitely a “new teaching” – a teaching with authority, they said. And that was epiphany, revelation for them.

Now interesting here is that the Greek word for authority is not simply about power. Often we think of the two as meaning about the same thing. Which would mean that Jesus came into the

synagogue and basically flexed his holy muscles and in those moments impressed and amazed people into belief. But here's what the Greek tells us. The word used for "authority" here is more related to essence than it is to power. It's internal "out of one's essence," not an externally bestowed power, but authority was understood to come from within. So what they were witnessing in the synagogue was a living, breathing reality that spoke to them from very deep and real places about the presence of God. They were witnessing One who was not only teaching – giving them rules or codes to live by – they were witnessing someone who was also transforming and the experience with the man in the temple that day was a clear example of the kind of transformation that Jesus was about. Not simply establishing his own place, but giving a place to others too.

What happened in this story was that Jesus used his authority to grant someone else's theirs. It's beautiful really. That man with the demon was separated from himself and probably from his community and from his family too, at least from regular, "normal" participation and inclusion. There was something that had power over this man and so Jesus freed him, and restored him to himself. And so at that moment the man in the story had authority too; he got his essence back. When we think of authority this way we see that throughout his life, Jesus not only established his own authority, he did it by restoring other people to theirs. And in the end he surrendered all of his power in order to still claim the authority that was the presence of God in him.

And so this tells us something about how to be church. Often religious leaders and communities rely on the power that comes from position or name or status in the community and occasionally that power is used as a power over others or a power that we have but others don't. But Jesus relied on something else and we can too. Granted, it's rare if ever that we experience commanding an unclean spirit to leave and then get to watch that happen -- but we all have demons of some kind - those pieces that separate rather than connect us to the love of God and love of others. But here as Body of Christ we have been given the opportunity to use our authority – our essence – maybe we can even call it our image of Godness? - to help others discover theirs too. Like Jesus did for the man in the synagogue that day. We have been invited to be a different sort of presence in the world – one that reveals a bit of God in new and life-giving ways, relying on authority – trusting our essence – even when we feel powerless. As

Church, like Christ we can use the authority we have been given to challenge the demons, to release one another, to raise up, to free, to re-establish those who are separated in whatever way from themselves, their community and God. To give others the gift of epiphany.

So, today as we baptize, it might be good to see this household of God as a community committed to using our authority, our essence as children of God to grant others theirs. A community that proclaims that we see this strength, this presence in Andrew and Nolan and Harper and we vow with them to use that grace to heal the world.

Amen.

Which means that this is how the church should use its authority to. To raise up. To free. To re-establish community.

One more thing about this. You can be powerless and have authority. An inner something that . I carry images of this kind of authority in my heart. That man who stood in front of the tanks in Tianemen Square had it. Those little girls that crossed the color barrier and attended school had it. That day Rosa Parks refused to move, she had it. People who at any moment could have been overpowered by their surroundings, yet found it in themselves to stand their ground and show the world something else. Some inner something - maybe it's the part of us that is in the image of God. And maybe this is part of what baptism is about.

We say Andrew and Nolan and Harper, among us you are free. You have the authority to speak your true voice and while we work for the kingdom, we want you to be among us.

Sometimes surrender your power in order to establish your authority - the cross