

## “ A New Teaching”

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First Presbyterian Church  
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**Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 111**  
**New Testament Lesson: Mark 1:21-28**

Author Kathleen Norris used to play a game with elementary-school children in which she would make a deal with them. “First you get to make noise”, she would bargain, “and then you’ll make silence.”

The time of noise was always predictably chaotic-shouting, pounding and stomping, like a football team exploding out of a locker room. But the period of silence that followed was unexpectedly passionate and creative.

When the children were asked to write about it, says Norris, “their images often had a depth and maturity that was unlike anything else they wrote.”

One boy discovered that “silence is a tree spreading its branches to the sun.”

One third-grader’s poem turned into a prayer: “Silence is spiders spinning their webs; it’s like a silkworm making its silk. Lord, help me to know when to be silent.”

And a little girl offered a gem of spiritual wisdom that Norris herself returns to when her life becomes too noisy and distracting: “Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go.”

Mark opens his account of Jesus’ public ministry with two words from Jesus: “Be silent.” And immediately the demon possessing the man in the synagogue is defeated. The demon submits to Jesus’ authority. And this has the crowd exclaim, “What is this? A new teaching-with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

Now, we don’t often think in terms of unclean spirits or people being possessed by demons. And yet, we do have our share of troubles-arguments with one another; differences about what’s right and what’s wrong; violence-domestic and otherwise; war; oppression of the poor and powerless; political, corporate and social systems that waste valuable resources and cause more harm than good. You name it, and we’ve got our demons, too.

What is it that gives Jesus authority over such demons, over the troubles we face in the world today, the troubles we face in our homes, our communities, churches, schools, and workplaces? **How can we have Jesus on our side** when faced with life’s demons?

Mark sets up a sharp distinction between the authority of Jesus and the authority of the scribes, those keepers of religious law and societal rules that are supposed to serve everyone equally and make everything work better.

The scribes and the Pharisees judged between right and wrong based on religious law-cut -and -dry; no deviation; right is right and wrong is wrong. They ruled based on a ridged system that they upheld regardless of the outcome-the letter of the law, apart from its spirit.

Jesus' authority, on the other hand, is not based on a set of religious or civil laws. His authority, rather, is based on the results that are achieved. For instance, in Luke 7 when John the Baptizer send his disciples to Jesus asking, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus says to them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."

We can judge proper authority-God-given authority-only by results. For Jesus, for God, it's all about ushering in a New Kingdom, a new heaven and a new earth in which "God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven."

So, how do we tap into God's will? How do we teach and minister and heal and reconcile and otherwise go through our day with the certainty, the authority of those doing God's will-receiving the outcomes God would have for us and for those we love?

*Jesus* knew God's will in His heart of hearts, He embodied God's will, and maybe we do too, if we really search for it. But in actuality, we do a pretty poor job as individuals discerning God's will and acting upon it all on our own. Individually, we get too caught up in our own wants and needs, our own knee-jerk reactions to perceived attacks, all our deeply ingrained beliefs about What's right and what's wrong.

So actually, it's much safer to discern God's will as a people, as followers of Christ coming together and seeking to discover what is right and what is wrong. That's how we can be sure Jesus is here along side us; that's how we can be sure that our life's efforts will produce fruit worthy of our calling as Christians. If we don't see more joy, happiness, and contentment-if not individually, then certainly as a people.-if things aren't getting generally better in life, then we're missing the mark. And at such times, both individually and as a society, it's time to **seek out others who can lead us to the right path.**

While Paula Melton, Jan Spencer, Bob Stikeleather, Jennifer Vansandt, and I were in Guatemala with the Presbytery Partnership a week and a half ago, we met a woman named Filomina. Filomina has about a fifth-grade education-when measured by society's standards.

But, she has a sage's wisdom theologically when measured by the results that show up in her life.

Filomina lives on a plantation in Guatemala where the workers toil all day long in the fields to earn what we leave on the counter for a cup of coffee. And within this setting, God has raised up Filomina to be a pastor. She is the first woman, in fact, to be taken under care for pastoral training by the Maya Quiche' Presbytery.

Obviously, for Filomina, this will be a long process. She has to first undertake some basic education, and then go on from there.

But in the meantime, Filomina is leading a church; it's common in Guatemala for a respected community leader to be called into ministry with little or no training.

As we listened to Filomina's story we were astounded to learn that she had been sanctioned-removed from her pastoral duties-merely because she served on a committee that hold oversight of a program that fell into mismanagement. Because one employeem misappropriate funds, the entire committee was sanctioned, and the leaders were removed from office, permanently.

But what astounded us more was the quite, faithful way that Filomina endured this punishment.

She was able to accept the authority of the Presbytery with such grace. And she had this ability to accept such earthly authority because she knew a higher authority – the authority of God, by which she was called to be a pastor.

The day we happened to be there to hear Filomina's story was the day her sanction was lifted and she returned to her pastoral duties.

The road ahead for Filomina will not be ease. It will be a process of give and take, rejoicing and dispairing, two steps forward and one step back; a process, quite honestly, that is familiar to all of us.

We all face the authority of others that sometimes seems to get in the way of our sense of calling; the progress we feel certain is there for us to make in life, if it weren't for some misguided person or system.

And what it is that will see Filomina through such a process – what it is that sees us through – is knowing that God is at work in our lives, AND that God's will will be done. It may not seem like it at times, we may have to sit on the sidelines for awhile, life may be unfair and even hurtful, but if we come together in faith seeking God's will and respecting each other's differences, **the Holy Spirit will guide us at every step.**

Guidance of the Holy Spirit, it's a hallmark of the Presbyterian denomination. It's a process by which God's will is discerned through the united voice of many rather than the authority of one. Only Jesus Christ has singular authority. And it was by this authority that Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide us and uplift us – to guide and lift up the Maya Quiche' Presbytery and Heartland Presbytery, and you as families, and each of us in whatever groups we belong to, whatever activities we're involved with.

Discerning God's will, tapping into the certainty

Of a God-given authority rarely works out well as a one-person job.

The church member was walking across a bridge one day and saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So she ran over and said, "Stop! Don't do it!" "Why shouldn't I?" he said.

"Well, there's so much to live for." "Like what?" "Well, are you religious?" He said yes. She said, "Me, too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?" "Christian." "Me, too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?" "Protestant." "Me, too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

“Baptist.” “Wow, me, too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?” “Baptist Church of God!” “Me, too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?” “Reformed Baptist Church of God!” “Me, too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?” He said, “Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!”

She said, “Jump if you want to, heretic!”

What’s right and what’s wrong. In the end, we don’t get to decide. The best we can do is follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and examine the results that show up in our lives for clues as to whether we are following God’s will, or not.

When we look at what we see and hear in our lives, in our church, in our community, our country, our world, do we see the blind receiving their sight (those who are misguided finding a better way); do we see the lame walking (those who are weighed down making progress in life); do we see the lepers cleansed (those who are shunned and ostracized embraced and welcomed back into the community); are those who are deaf to the truth beginning to hear the voice of God in their lives; are the people who’ve reached a dead end raised from their despair and given a new chance at life; does the Good News reach into the poorest and most downtrodden sectors of society, the most remote places on the planet? These are the measures of what’s right and what’s wrong. These are the measures of whether our words and actions are aligned with God’s will. None of us has it all figured out. None of us is the authority on what’s right and what’s wrong. But together, when led by Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we do tap into a higher authority – the authority of God.

The next time you’re set with a problem, decision or even troubling circumstances, whose authority will you rely on – your own? That of our imperfect society and corruptible rule of law? Or will you seek a higher authority, an authority revealed to us as we faithfully come together, seeking to follow Jesus Christ in all that we say and do as a people of God?

**Amen**

## PASTORAL PRAYER

As we settle into this place of prayer, O God, help us to still our minds and open our hearts.

In these moments of silence, we confess to you the times when we have doled out judgment rather than justice, self-righteousness instead of compassion, and bigotry instead of benevolence.

Let us breathe in your forgiveness and show mercy to those who have treated us less than mercifully.

Enable us to extend forgiveness to those who seem undeserving in our sight.

Help us to give of ourselves without counting the cost as we love people into life.

Grant us the grace to see others as you do and to follow Jesus, who came that we might know what a life of love looks like.

Life in you, O God, is a life of prayer and faithfulness. So we pray for those in need this day. We pray for our Christian brothers and sisters in Guatemala who live below what we would consider a minimal standard. Thank you for their faithful witness – may it increase our own.

We pray for those recovering from surgery or illness; let your healing, O God, be theirs.

We pray for those who mourn; bring them peace.

Bring us all a sense of your peace and provision, O Lord, that in all our needs we might turn to you, our Comfort, our Shepherd, our Savior, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.