

Fr. Curtis Miller     January 28, 2024     Homily for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

Many years ago, the governor of Massachusetts was out campaigning for re-election. On one particularly busy day, he had been so busy that he hadn't had a chance to eat anything. So he was pretty happy that one of his stops later in the day was at a community chicken dinner. As he made his way down the line, the woman serving the chicken placed a small piece of chicken on his plate. He was so hungry that he said, "That's a little small. Could I have another piece?" She replied, "No, only one piece per person." The governor was a little perturbed and he said, "Do you know who I am? I'm the governor!" Without missing a beat, she replied, "And do you know who I am? I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Now get moving, Mister!"

While some people might have titles or positions of authority, other people can sometimes command greater authority, just naturally, without any special titles. When Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum, the Pharisees and other religious leaders present that day thought of themselves as having authority. After all, they had the rabbinical training and the official certifications. And Who did this Jesus think He was? He was just some carpenter from Nazareth, a nobody. And yet, Jesus immediately established that He had greater authority than them, by His words and actions.

When the rabbis taught, it was customary to cite other rabbis, out of deference and humility. They introduce their teachings by saying something like, "As Rabbi Hillel taught..." or "According to Rabbi Shammai..." They would also cite the Scriptures in support of the points they were making. However, Jesus taught very differently. He proclaimed His own teaching without citing any rabbis. He even went so far as to add to the Ten Commandments brought down from Mount Sinai by Moses, preaching in His Sermon on the Mount, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not kill,' but I say to you, 'Do not hate your brother in your hearts.' You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery,' but I say to you, 'Do not lust in your hearts.'" In other words, Jesus was doing more than just not citing other rabbis; He was teaching as if He had more authority than even Moses! And we, as Christians, know that Jesus *does* have greater authority than Moses. Jesus isn't just a prophet of God; He *is* God. Jesus doesn't need to cite the Word of God in the Scriptures; He *is* the Word of God incarnate. While many of the common people started to recognize Jesus' authority, the Pharisees just felt their own authority threatened by Jesus. They refused to listen to Him.

While the religious leaders were too blinded by Jesus' apparent lack of training and status to be a teacher, someone present in the synagogue that day did recognize Who Jesus was immediately: the demon inside the possessed man. Right away, the demon says, "I know Who You are: the Holy One of God." Jesus shows the authority of His Word even further by exorcising the demon and saving that man. People were amazed because Jesus taught with His own authority and His Word had the power to drive out demons and perform miracles.

The shame is that you and I are often too much like the Pharisees, not paying enough attention to Jesus, and not recognizing Him as the Son of God. It's embarrassing that demons apparently recognize Jesus' authority faster than most of us do. One bit of good news is that even if we are sometimes a little too slow and sluggish to recognize Jesus, to perk up our ears when we hear the authority with which He speaks, when we do finally wake up, we can do something that the demons don't do: We can humble ourselves to obey freely what Jesus commands us to do.

Now, many of us have problems with authority, usually because we've been at the receiving end of poorly exercised authority by worldly leaders. We don't want anyone to tell us what to do. We've all had too many experiences of being subjected to arbitrary and flawed authority. But Jesus' authority is different from all those flawed worldly authorities. When Jesus commands us to do something, we can be sure of two things: 1). It actually is the best thing to do, and 2). It is for our own good. Jesus never commands us to satisfy His own vanity, like worldly leaders do. He never says, "Jump!" just to see us jump. Jesus' commands come from a place of perfect wisdom and perfect love for us. Jesus has come into this world to establish His Kingdom in our midst. As our King, Jesus has authority over us, but it is always a benevolent authority.

Jesus came to establish His Kingdom in our world because it had become enemy-occupied territory. This is what the Israelites of the time expected from their Messiah: A warrior who would drive out the Roman occupiers and re-establish the Kingdom of Israel. But Jesus had a more far-reaching mission. At the beginning of creation, God created Adam and Eve in His Own image, as the pinnacle of His creation, to be stewards of His creation. Yet Adam and Eve quickly fell, believing in the devil's lies. Ever since then, the devil had seen the world and even humanity as his subjects. Jesus came not to drive the Romans out of Israel, but to drive the devil out of our hearts and our world.

So whatever evils and sins we have allowed to take authority over us and conquer our hearts, let's hand them over to the authority of Christ, that He may drive them out, just as He drove the demon out of the possessed man in the synagogue. Let us remember, Jesus doesn't say to us, "Get your act together, make up for all your sins, and then you can be a part of My Kingdom." No. Instead, Jesus simply says to us, "Turn away from your sins, repent, and come back to Me. You don't have to fix yourself before you can come to Me. First, come to Me, then I will heal you of your sins. Follow My teachings, which I give you out of love, then enter into the joy of My Kingdom."

And finally, always be polite to the volunteers in the lunch line, even if you are a governor.