

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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See if you can cast your mind back about 25 or 30 years ago, and you might remember reading in the news about a movement that was emerging in the Evangelical Church in the United States. It could have been a reaction to the moral majority of the Reagan generation, but regardless of how it started, during that time, quite a few of our Evangelical brothers and sisters started to ask some big questions, not all of which were terribly welcome by the Evangelical leadership.

These emergent questioners were reading their Bibles, and what they found was a little different from what they were hearing on Sunday mornings. On Sunday mornings, from their Evangelical pulpits, they were hearing that women should not be in public church leadership. But then in their Bibles, they would read these incredibly rich histories of Ruth and Naomi, of Queen Esther, of Mary the Mother of God, of Mary Magdalene the apostle to the apostles. They even heard stories in which God was referred to as Sophia, as Wisdom. And it was hard to square the teachings of the church with the stories in the Bible. They also heard from the pulpits that the queer people in their lives were sinful and were responsible for many societal ills. And when they looked around their lives, they found that the queer people in their lives were no more or less sinful than anyone else, and they had a hard time reconciling a religious teaching that asked them to cut off family and friends with a religion that they believed had love as its root.

And these same questioners heard from the pulpit that they should not divorce but instead they should live their married lives in a biblical manner. And the questioners asked: should I take two wives like Jacob did, or should I take 700 wives like Solomon? Should I take a lover and have my lover's husband killed as King David did, or should I instead disparage the entire institution of marriage like St. Paul did? This disconnect between what people were noticing in their lives and what they were hearing in church grew and grew until finally, these questioners started to meet outside of the church. They met in bars to discuss theology. They met in school gyms. They met in homes over simple bread and wine. Journalists and historians started to call this group of questioners who were leaving evangelical churches members of a new moment that they called "The Emergent Church." And, as one famous observer of American religion noticed, the main question that the emergent church focused on was: Where is the authority?

You can think of this movement, in some ways, as a crisis of authority. If the Bible doesn't have every answer, where should I go? If the preacher doesn't have every answer, who should I ask? If my parents' and grandparents' way of being religious is unsatisfactory to me, what are my next steps?

This group of emergent Christians soon started to grow, and their influence began to feed back into old mainline denominations as well as the catholic church. Fast forward to the year 2000, and Catholics are questioning cardinals, Episcopalians are questioning bishops, and even Baptists are questioning the preacher.

For a lot of American Christians, this crisis of authority led to a steep decline in American religious participation. Many, many people decided to leave church altogether.

But, for those who stayed, the religious project stopped being one of receiving authority from the pulpit. Instead, the new religious project is this: how do we create wisdom together? How do we share religious authority while still trying to be faithful?

Which is, I think, where today's Gospel story comes into play. In this story, these religious people in the synagogue are having an authority crisis not so different from what we've seen recently in the US. Some in the temple in Jesus' time think that the answers are in a hereditary priesthood—the Sadducees. Some think that the way forward is the careful adherence to the Torah—the Pharisees. And still others believe that they must wait for a Messiah out in the desert with fasting and ritual pureness—the Essenes. No one could quite agree on what this all means. No one was quite sure where the authority should lie.

Enter Jesus, coming into the synagogue and healing the man of his demons. And those who witnessed this all of a sudden knew—there, THERE is the authority.

So, what does that mean for us? What does that mean for a congregation that is famous for questioning and that is looking forward to the next decade of being a church together? What does it mean for us to, on one hand, have an open conversation about where the authority lies, but on the other hand to be Christian people fully committed to following this Jesus fellow as he moves through the world, healing and casting out demons?

The days are over when the priest has the final word on how you all should think. But I can tell you how I deal with this authority stuff, and maybe it will be helpful for you.

There is a moment in the Eucharistic prayers at the table when the priest asks God to pour the Holy Spirit out onto the bread and the wine. And right afterward, the priest asks God to sanctify all the people present and to make us one body. I always cross myself at that part, mostly because it is how I was taught, but also as I get older to remind myself that this prayer is just as important as the prayers over the bread. I'm asking God to fulfill that promise that Jesus made at the Last Supper—the one that says that Jesus will be with us in a special way when we are all gathered together. In this way, I think we are just like those people in the synagogue from the gospel story—we are a little bit lost until we see Jesus among us, healing and making things new. And

so, each week, right here in this space, I have the privilege of seeing Jesus appear, just as promised, in the hands and the feet of everyone present. I get to see the casting out of demons and the healing of souls in the lives of all of you. And, so, for me, a religious life is one of more questions than of answers. And most days I'm okay with that. But, also, even though I find certainty sometimes elusive, I never doubt the presence of Christ among us. We are not faithful to a priest or to a doctrine or even to a book. We are instead faithful to Christ who shows up day after day, week after week. We look for authority, not in the obvious places, but we instead look for the authority of a God who heals, who names, who calls us in, and who feasts. And, as we look to the future of our parish, we even look for the authority in each other, in this community that is made holy by the constant and loving presence of Christ. Amen.