**Under Authority**

Based on [Matthew 8:1-13](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt8.1-13)

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The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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The gospel lesson today has two miracles. The first is Jesus healing a leper. The second is his healing the servant of a Roman centurion. We will consider these accounts in the context of the authority of the Word of God…and especially the authority christ has given his church to forgive sins, and to retain them.

Today’s gospel features the authority of the word of God. Jesus heals a leper by stretching out his hand, touching him and saying “be clean”. The man asks and Jesus heals him with a word. But he does so by means of a ritual. He stretches out his hand and touches him.

Oftentimes when Jesus heals, he uses his word in the context of ritual or a ceremony. For instance, Jesus once spit in the dirt making mud and applied it to the eyes of the blind man, and the blind man gained sight. This is a ritual in the sense that Jesus uses gestures and objects and repetitive motions to apply benefits that are spiritual and the mechanics of which are unseen.

Some say that baptism is just water, and communion is just bread and wine. But were the mud cakes just spit and dirt?...By no means! Not when Jesus, the incarnate word, ordains them for his purpose. The word is the source of all authority, and though spittle, dirt, water, bread and wine have no power of their own, the word can authorise such means to carry this out. The word can use the physical touch of a leper to effect what is called the blessed exchange…Jesus applying his cleanness to the man while taking upon himself his sin. The word has all authority, even to use touch in the transmission of blessing, to use water for baptism, and to use bread and wine for life giving body and blood, without which you have no life, but through which eternal life is given you.

The gospel gives account of these men who recognize the authority of the Word of God through prayer. Now, when God is not seen, we fold our hands in prayer, close our eyes, make the sign of the cross and call upon him. But when God is visibly in the room, you pray by going to him and asking him for help…just as you would anybody else. So both men go to Jesus in prayer, meaning they go to him and ask him for what they need and trust that he has both the power and the desire to do so.

Jesus shows his authority to heal the leper face to face. But the healing of the centurion's servant shows that Jesus can heal people who are not in front of him. When the centurion asks Jesus to heal his servant, Jesus says, Okay i will go to him and heal him. The centurion responds with great faith. First he is humble, recognizing that he and his house are not deserving of Jesus presence, and second he confesses the universal authority of God’s word. He says, “I am a man under authority, giving orders and they are obeyed…so it is for you over all creation. You don’t need to be present with him, Just say it say the word and creation will obey.”

Again and again, the authority of the Word of God is taught as the foundation of the Gospel. God’s Word is not limited by physical touch, or water, or bread or wine, but can authorise them for use. The word it is not limited by space or time but transcends them; it is not bound but it binds and it looses.

The scripture says that God “upholds the universe by the word of his power”. The reason things fall to the earth is not because of gravity, but because God says the word, every single time something falls, to have it fall with such mathematically precise regularity. Jesus, the word made flesh, is involved in everything. There are no laws of nature…there is only God’s word and authority, and all powers in this world are subordinate to it.

All things are under the authority of the word of God. Elsewhere, when Jesus approaches a demon-possessed man, the demon has power over the man, but Jesus has authority. And the demon knows it…”Have you come to destroy us before the appointed time?”...Jesus says, “Be silent and come out of him.” **Later on in a boat, Jesus is asleep while the disciples were fretting over the wind and the waves. Again, rogue powers in creation are confronted by the word of the living God.** Jesus rebuked them saying “be still” and the wind and the waves cease. Actually the greek verb is hup-acuo-oh…they “hear under” him, much like Mary listening at Jesus’ feet and getting the better portion. Most translations say the wind and the waves *obeyed* him. They display great power, but in the end are bound to the authority of God’s word.

So someone might say, “If God’s word has authority, why is there so much disobedience in the world.” It is true that Adam and Eve didn’t obey the word of God, and that the world is under the power of the devil. And even we who are justified in christ and sanctified by his spirit daily sin much and need forgiveness. **And so, to carry the disobedience of sin on his own shoulders, the Son of God comes to us in his humanity, in his humility preaching that he must suffer at the hands of sinful men, die and rise again.** He never commands them to stop. He suffers silently, yet he says to Pilate, “You would have no authority had my father not given it to you.” We know that all things happen under the authority of God, and even in our sufferings God’s power is made perfect in our weakness…not so that we will be defeated, but that we will participate in the glory of the only begotten son of God, the glory of suffering at the hands of sinful men and for the sin of the world.

God permits the rogue powers of creation…sin, death, the devil and the world…to defy his authority for a time. This is the scandal of the Jews and foolisness to the gentiles…but it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. God allows his authority to be acknowledged not by power or force, but by faith…so that it can be confessed though unseen.

When the scribes see Jesus forgive the sins of a paralytic, the scribes scoff because only God can forgive sins. On other words, they don’t believe he was forgiven. “4 ***But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? 5 For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” 7 And he rose and went home. 8 When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.***

Which is more powerful? Which is a greater miracle? Which is a more costly, daunting, and supernatural act…to heal a paralytic or to forgive his sins. The former is a display of power before the eyes, the latter is a confession of power before faith. Which would impress you more? If I were to heal a paralytic in front of you here and now today, would you call your friends and relatives and boast in what you saw? You might get out your smartphones to record the event. The world would see it and be impressed. /// But understand this…Jesus says there is more cause to be impressed when God forgives a man’s sins. The devil can do signs and wonders to deceive, even perhaps make a lame man walk…but only God can forgive sins…and that is more impressive than the authority to heal the flesh, and he has given that authority to men.

Because Jesus christ has died for the sin of the whole world, and in his flesh has reconciled you in his body of flesh by his death. He has reconciled all nations by the cross, killing the hostility. By this one man, he has given the authority to forgive sins to men…to his church who has the keys to the kingdom, to bind and loose forgive and retain sins on earth as it is in heaven. He conquered death and having risen with the keys to death and hades in his hand, he breathed on his disciples and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit…if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven…if you retain their sins they are retained. He gave such authority to me.

And so, today as a called and ordained servant of the word I have announced this day the grace of God unto you. I was called and ordained by the one holy catholic and apostolic church, present and in effect through our assembling in Lethbridge Alberta, and given authority to forgive sins in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ…and to retain them, and bind the unrepentant to their sins, despite Christs’ atoning work on the cross for them…so long as they do not repent…for they have denied the master who bought them, and their guilt remains.

So which is greater, for our church to heal paralytics and blind men, or to forgive their sins? We will not heal any paralytics, but we will forgive sins today. The world will not understand or believe the hype, so you can keep your camera phones away. But upon your confession this day your sins have been forgiven, and that is greater. Your sins are a greater problem than your gout or your back pain or even your death. These are the wages of sin, but the sin itself has been covered by the body and blood of Christ, which is miraculously distributed to you under bread and wine. You don’t see it’s power, but you believe in the authority of the flesh of Christ to forgive sins. And the power of that authority will be seen on the day of the Lord.

When Christ comes again, his authority will be seen in power. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess, many reluctantly, that christ is Lord. What we see now dimly, then we will see face to face. All will be revealed and what was in the dark will be plainly seen.