

If I were to stand up here in the pulpit and say that I could stand on my head, you'd probably want me to prove it, wouldn't you? A claim like that needs proof. You need to see what it looks like to see if I can actually do it. The truth be told, that is true also of claims of authority. If I claim the authority to be able to say something or to do something, I better be able to prove it, or else I won't have any authority at all. It's like if I went down to Bismarck to the state penitentiary, and I went up to the warden and I said to him, "You have to let everybody go. Let everybody out right now." He would probably ask me, "Well, where's your authority? Where you get the authority to say such a thing?" And if I couldn't prove it, he has every right to not believe me, to not want to have anything to do with me, because that's just common sense. But if I produced a letter from the governor, for example, and presented that to him, he would have no choice. He'd have to listen to me, because I have proven that I have authority over him. He would then have to let everyone go, just as I had said.

But Christians, what if the warden after I proved my authority still didn't let anyone go? What if he still didn't listen to the words I was saying, even if I had proven that I could say them? What would you say about somebody like that? You'd probably say, "He's crazy. He should listen. I've proven my authority. I proven that I have the right to say this, so he has no choice but to follow." To not listen in that case is just foolishness. But Christians, Jesus also speaks to you with authority. And he has proven himself over and over again to have that authority. So the question we have to ask ourselves today is, will you listen to what Jesus has to say? Or will you turn away from him like our hypothetical warden? That's the question that we have to wrestle with this morning.

Because Jesus in our Gospel lesson for today comes to his hometown, and when he gets to his hometown, there comes to him a paralytic along with his friends. Jesus sees their faith, and he says to that paralyzed man, "Take heart, my son. Your sins are forgiven." Now, the scribes heard this, and they start to wonder within themselves, saying, "Who does this guy think that he is? Who is he to claim this kind of authority for himself? Only God can forgive sins! Only God has that kind of authority! This man is blaspheming. This man is claiming something that only rightly belongs to God. And so there's no way he's going to be able to prove to us that he can do this, because it would take some pretty spectacular proof to show that he was in fact God."

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts--notice he doesn't hear them speak. He just knows their thoughts, because he is, after all, God--Jesus, knowing their thoughts, says to them, "Why do you think evil in your hearts? Why do you think that I don't have the authority to say these things? Which one of these is easier, I ask you? To say, your sins are forgiven, or to say, rise and walk?" What Jesus is saying is effectively this: both of these things, forgiving sins and saying with a word and causing someone to rise up and walk again, are both things that only God can do. And if I can do one of them beyond the shadow of any doubt, that means that I can also do the other one. It proves that I have the authority to do both of them. Now Jesus says, you think that saying your sins are forgiven is an easier thing to do, because after all, if you're just claiming to be able to do something without having to back it up, especially something you can't see, you can claim anything! I could claim that I'm the king of the world. If I don't have to prove it, then you just have to accept it for what it is. It can be faked. But the other thing, saying with a word and causing a paralyzed man to walk again, is not something that can be faked. You either can do it or you can't. "And so that you may know," Jesus says, "that the Son of Man has authority on

earth to forgive sins," he turns to that paralyzed man, and he says to him, "Rise, pick up your bed, and go home." And that's exactly what happens, because Jesus has the authority given to him by the Father, and he demonstrated and proved that authority on that day.

But Christians, Jesus also speaks with authority to you personally. Jesus speaks with authority and says to you and promises to you many things. Jesus says by his authority, "Your sins have been forgiven." Jesus says by his authority, "This is my body and my blood given for you for the forgiveness of your sins." Jesus says by his authority that you have been baptized into him, and whoever has been baptized into his death has also been baptized into his life. And Jesus promises by his authority that whoever lives and believes in him will never die. And he proves that authority to you, Christians. He proves it in so many ways. Every time he does a miracle in the Scriptures, it shows that he is in fact God. Jesus even says in the Gospel of John, "If you don't want to believe the things that I'm saying, believe the works. Believe the things that I do, because they show that I have the authority to say these things." And the greatest miracle that Jesus has done to prove his authority to us, Christians, is his own resurrection. Because when he died and went into the grave, he came forth again. He was raised from the dead like only God can do, and vindicated by the Spirit, proved to be the Son of God by that resurrection, so that we know beyond all doubt that he has the authority, all authority in heaven and on earth, to do as he pleases. That's what Jesus has. That's what God has done.

So why, Christians? Why do we struggle with that? Why do we struggle with the authority of God? Maybe it's because we have doubts. We start to hear that Jesus says your sins are forgiven, and you wonder, how can he mean me? How can he mean me when he knows all of the things that I've done, all of those sins I've done in my past that I can't seem to get away from? Surely, he must be talking about someone else when he says your sins are forgiven. But Christians, Jesus means what he says. And he says by his authority given to him by the Father, "Your sins are forgiven." There's not quotation marks around that. There's not asterisk at the end of it. He means exactly what he says. Your sins are forgiven. Though your sins be as red as scarlet, yet they shall be as white as wool. "My blood has covered over all of your sins," Jesus says, "and you belong to me, because I have paid the debt that you could not pay. It's all over. Your sins are forgiven."

But maybe the other reason why we struggle with this, Christians, is because we forget that being under Jesus means that we are also under his authority. That when he speaks to us, he changes us. He makes us a new creation. We have become something totally different from what we were. We were taken out of darkness and brought into light, taken out of death and brought into life. Jesus has done all of these things by his authority. So why do we keep going back to our sins? Why do we keep going back to the things which we used to do? That is the way of darkness. That is the way of our former lives. It's like saying, "Jesus, thanks for the forgiveness, but I've got sinning to do. I've got to get back to what I really want to do." It's taking Jesus' authority and saying, "No thanks. I'd rather go my own way."

But, as Paul tells us in our epistle reading for today, that is the way of deceitful desires, the former manner of our lives, the way that leads ultimately to destruction. That is not how you learned Christ. But Jesus speaks with authority, and he changes us. He transforms us, so that we have become new in him. And because we are new, we've become righteous like him. We have become holy like him. We have become all of these things, because what Jesus says is true.

So, as Paul tells us, let us put away falsehood, telling the truth to one another. Let us not be angry so that we sin, not letting the sun go down on our anger. Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him do honest work. Because that is who we are. That is who Jesus says that we are. And because we are new in him, we are under his authority, and we belong to him forever.

So Christians, let us turn away from our former lives, the sins that we used to walk in. Jesus speaks with authority. He says to you by that authority, "Your sins are forgiven you. I have made you mine. You belong to me forever. And nothing will ever change that." Turn to him, Christians. Cling to him in holiness and righteousness forever, for he is the one who by his authority has made you Christians and heirs of eternal life.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.