My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Eternal God of our Epiphany bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

There’s a good lesson here this week, something that we should all pay a little more attention to. There’s a famous writer and lay theologian named G.K. Chesterton who was also known as the “prince of paradox.” He once told a kind of parable about this scripture we just read in Mark’s Gospel. I remember it like this:

“There once was a crowded restaurant, and an enormous bull entered with all the stomping and great heated breathing that bulls do, knocking diners and tables this way and that. ‘I might rise’, (Chesterton says), ‘to address the bull that he certainly had the power to enter the restaurant and be there. But I would equally assure the bull that he had no authority whatsoever.’”

There’s a big difference between the two isn’t there? Have we been there in our own lives? We know about power from our earliest years, mostly because of our own powerless-ness as infants and young children being fully dependent on others. There are any number of adults who are there to help us, but also correct us, and more to try and get us to do what they want, because, well, they said so.

What does a very young child say to an adult with whom they disagree? Ever been at a family gathering at an aunt’s house, and your child is having fun being more and more rambunctious in the house. Your well-meaning niece or nephew asks your child to settle down, to which your child says, in response, “You’re not my Mom!”.

So the child doesn’t dispute that this is not their house, or it’s a family gathering and everyone has the right to be there. But your child does not assign any authority to the request, and may very likely resume their behavior, maybe even more out-of-control. So the niece, recognizing that she lives there and has authority but has no power, goes and gets the Mom, who has power in any place she appears, but also has authority the child recognizes. And it usually results in the youngster receiving a scolding and a time-out, with a few tears and an apology. At least in the Midwest where I grew up that was true, and I think it probably happens more than most parents care to admit. But we can all identify, can’t we? That our kids can be little demons who cause havoc until power and authority appears, and it’s only then that things can return to normal.

Have we been there in our own lives? Hmmm?

It happened to me as lunchroom monitor when I was a little older but still a child. The honor students were enlisted to help teachers maintain order at lunch hour. We had a large room in the middle of the school that was cafeteria sometimes, gym sometimes, and stage/auditorium other times. So while roving the café-gym-atorium during lunch hour, I loved being able to tell kids to shut up or settle down. I had a plastic whistle if needed, which attracted attention of Mrs. Struthers, who had the real metal whistle, if there was a group of kids who just wouldn’t listen. But in general, when dealing with my near-peers, the younger kids listened and the older ones rolled their eyes but settled down. So while I relished this hint of power, I had no authority whatsoever. The authority was with the lady with the metal whistle, who could assign consequences to abberant behavior. But it took years of observing others before I learned that I had confused the authority of power with the power of authority.

A famous social scientist named Max Weber boiled down the different between power and authority. In its most basic terms, power has a coercive element, while authority has a noncoercive one. (repeat twice). See what I mean?

(say this slowly) You can do what I ask of you, because you must do what I have the power to make you do. That’s power. Sometimes it’s ok. Other times it feels kinda crazy.

(say this slowly) Or you can do what I ask of you, because you want to do it out of respect for who I am to you. How does that feel? Icky? Crazy? No, not at all. It actually gives a warm feeling doesn’t it?

The difference between the two motives is huge.

For me, I’ve noticed the folks I admire are that *those who sacrifice the most* in the **way of love**—and paradoxically, they also *end up with the greatest authority*. (say this again).

In other words, the folks who invite us to power rather than coerce us are the ones we listen to the most.

In the New Testament, Jesus repeatedly exercises his own special power of authority through love. With no political clout, no military at his command, no particular social prestige, and no wealth to his name, he reserves the authority of power for special occasions. We do not see him positioning himself to make others do what he commands. Instead, other people have to *want* the life he proposes.

We heard this last week, too didn’t we? Remember last week’s sermon? Sure you do, you remember that the whole of the Gospel is in Mark 1:15: “The time has come and the Kingdom is at hand, repent, and believe the Good News.”

It’s not a threat. It’s an invitation, but it has such power of life within it. And because it’s delivered by someone who seems to have it all together and whom God trusts, we also trust that it might be true. There’s something worth seeing in that invitation to turn our lives around. And we believe it.

We do believe it, right? Let’s return to today.

All of us are gathered at the church, in the synagogue. And it’s not any of us that recognize the true specialness of Jesus first. The first to recognize Jesus as someone who has real spiritual power is evil. Those persons who cannot bear the presence of pure love see themselves under threat and cry out. That doesn’t happen in church today, does it? When something that is good and wonderful happens, we try and destroy it before it can have any power and authority in God’s presence? Surely not us, Lord, surely we are not possessed by our demons in our church communities. We’re not demons are we? Just like our young children, we’re not demons, we’re our better angels….aren’t we?

Have we been there in our own lives? Hmmm?

So God is near, here, and evil sees God’s power first. But Jesus doesn’t destroy it, but he disconnects it. When he says for the demon to leave the person, he reclaims God’s own creation. But that act of power prompts the gathered worshipers to be astonished by his authority. “What is this? A new teaching—with **authority**!”. Both power and authority are in their right frame in this story, aren’t they?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

What they saw in Jesus was more than raw power. Bullies go around trying to bend the will of the world or the people around them to do their bidding. All manner of folks at the top of hierarchies in economic, military, political, and yes, even Church can do some heavy damage to not just the places they manage but the people who have to live with their decisions of power for power’s sake.

Have we been there in our own lives? Hmm?

Jesus shows something different in church. What the people witnessed was the power of love. The man never asked to be healed. And Jesus didn’t confront evil until it tried to hit him first. Jesus knows he doesn’t need to show off, but he also knows that he can’t destroy embodied evil. What he can do, and does do repeatedly, is recognize the dignity of those who have been claimed by forces other than love, and he restores that loving relationship—God and God’s image in each and every one of us—until we can start to see the world differently, richly, and magnificently as the Kingdom right here, right now. And that love is the secret of the Lord’s authority. As disciples of Jesus, emulating what Jesus does, do we have the power of love to be able to show it rather than wield it? Or do we bend the world to our own preferences and pre-judgements? Are our wild beasts putting God where it’s comfortable based on the way we live now, rather than the other way around?

So I’ll ask you once again—Have we been there in our own lives? Hmmm? What can we say about love within ourselves this day and each day? Thanks be to God, Amen.