

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

If you've attended Dr. Voelz' Bible class, you know he likes to talk about words — the words of God, and especially these last few years, the words of Jesus from the Gospel according to St. Mark. Words have meaning. He has written quite a bit about meaning, about understanding God's word, understanding it on different levels.

He likes to talk also about how words not only have meaning, but that words do things. A parent may scold or rebuke or threaten, for example. Or a parent may praise. And they do these things to elicit some sort of response — a change in behavior in a child, for example. Or perhaps to encourage a child to continued good behavior.

So words have power to do things, human words do, sometimes more, sometimes less. How much more, then, are the words that emanate from God! You know this is true. You know the creation account. You know how God spoke, and it was so: light, the waters above and the waters below, seas and dry land, the heavenly bodies, vegetation, and animals of the seas and air and land. *"Let there be ... and there was ..."* (Gen. 1). Those are words filled with Divine power.

It was the Word of God Himself who spoke the universe into being — *"in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world"* (Heb. 1:2). And it was the Word of God incarnate who manifested His Divine power in today's Gospel.

Indeed, this was all part of Jesus' work of salvation. To be sure, it culminated in cross and death and resurrection — this we call His passive obedience, submitting Himself unto death according to the Father's will. But Jesus accomplished our salvation also by His active obedience, humbling Himself to be born of woman, placing Himself under the jurisdiction of the law (Gal. 4:4), and submitting perfectly to the law — He was *"without sin"* (Heb. 4:15).

Jesus Himself declared His saving mission to us: *"For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:45). His purpose *"was attested to us by those who heard,"* namely, by the apostles: *"you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot"* (1 Pet. 1:18-19). And *"God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will"* (Heb. 2:3-4), signs like Jesus did in our Gospel today.

The people were astonished at His display of power, but the unclean demons knew exactly who was manifesting it ... not just "*Jesus of Nazareth*," not just "*the Christ*," but "*the Holy One of God*," "*the Son of God*." His was divine power.

Jesus first encountered "*a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon*," in a synagogue, of all places. It's not exactly where one expects to find such wickedness. On the other hand, we admit, it's still so today. As we Lutherans confess about church: "many hypocrites and evil persons are mingled within [the 'saints and true believers'] in this life," perhaps even hypocritical, evil pastors (Augsburg Confession, VIII:1). "Protect us from this, heavenly Father."

Jesus spoke to the man, rebuking the unclean demon: "*Be silent and come out of him!*" And the demonic spirit did. "*What is this word?*" the people wondered — a powerful word that "*commands the unclean spirits and they come out.*"

Jesus left the synagogue and went to the house of Simon Peter. Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. They asked for Jesus' help, and he gave it — again He spoke a word of rebuke to the fever, and it left her. There was no, "take this medicine and come back in ten days." No, immediately the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

People kept flocking to Jesus, bringing their sick and demon-possessed to Him. Jesus healed them all, laying hands on the sick and silencing the demons with more rebukes with divine power.

All of these signs and wonders and miracles bear witness not only to Jesus' divine power, but also to His divine authority. "*[W]ith authority and power*" Jesus did these things, the people affirmed, as Jesus Himself did a bit later when He forgave the sins of "*a man who was paralyzed*" (Luke 5:18). The Jewish leaders objected to Jesus' audacity: "*Who can forgive sins but God alone*" (Luke 5:21), even accusing Him of blasphemy. But Jesus answered them, saying, "*that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins*"—*he said to the man who was paralyzed—'I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home'*" (Luke 5:24). And the man did. Jesus displayed the divine power that bore witness to His divine authority to forgive sins.

That authority to forgive sins Jesus handed over to His church on earth — actually, it's an authority to forgive and withhold forgiveness. "*[Jesus] breathed on [His disciples] and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld'*" (John 20:22-23).

This authority is a "special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth," we confess in the catechism (Office of the Keys), meant to be exercised

ordinarily through her pastors. Here again is the catechism: “What do you believe according to these words? I believe that when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, [forgiving and withholding forgiveness], this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.”

This authority and power exercised by pastors is one and the same as the authority of the Church, and the authority or office of the Keys. It is “according to the Gospel” much more than an explicit word of forgiveness done in private or at the beginning of the service. Jesus told the people: *“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.”* That is the authority and power granted to the Church, too: it “is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer Sacraments” (Augsburg Confession, XXVIII: 5).

For Christ sent out His apostles to preach orally and publicly. The Church is built on the Word incarnate and on the Word of God faithfully proclaimed. *“I have put my words in your mouth,”* the Lord told Jeremiah. *“Whatever I command you, you shall speak.”*

So it is with the Church. The “church is a mouth-house,” Luther preached, carrying not a self-chosen word, but the word of Christ, a word of forgiveness and life, of faith, hope, and love to our ears (Complete Sermons of Martin Luther, Vol. 1, p. 44). That’s her authority; that’s her power: the Gospel, *“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”* (Rom. 1:16). That’s what she delivers: Jesus said: *“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, ... and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”* (Matt. 16:19). *“Baptism ... now saves you”* (1 Pet. 3:21). *“God our Savior ... saved us ... by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior”* (Tit. 3:4-6). *“Do this ...”* (Luke 22:19). *“Take, eat; this is my body.”* *“Drink ... this is my blood of the [new testament], which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”* (Matt. 26:26-28).

The authority and power in all of this — done by Christ’s command — is Christ’s Himself. The same authority and power in Christ’s word that amazed the people in Jesus’ day amazes us still. These are marvelous, miraculous things given to us for our good. Let them be done according to Christ’s word. Believe and rejoice!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.