

SERMON: Authority
TEXT: Mark 1:21-28

1-31-21

Many of my professors in seminary were highly intelligent and extremely knowledgeable people. It was often mind-boggling to sit in class and listen to them lecture about the Bible, church history, theology, and more. I remember one husband and wife in particular, who both taught courses, and they were legendary for their Bible knowledge. They were also rather elderly, so we students often joked that they were probably there when the Bible was written. They were probably sitting on the hillside and in the synagogue while Jesus was teaching. We even wondered whether the male professor could be the Apostle Paul himself, as he was an expert on the book of Romans. These two were tough instructors. Their classes were not easy, and their expectations were very high.

Unfortunately, if you didn't live up to their expectations, if you struggled with trying to learn Greek, or if you didn't look or act like someone who should have the title "reverend," they could be very unkind. While they could recite the Bible backwards, and they knew the story of God, they didn't always do a great job of showing the love of God.

To be fair, none of us have done a perfect job of following the teachings of Jesus. But I guess I tend to expect more from someone who lives and breathes the words of the Bible.

In today's lesson from the gospel of Mark, it is early in Jesus' ministry, and he is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. People "were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

Now, while this sounds like a put-down of the scribes, this isn't meant to call into question what they were doing. Scribes were highly respected experts in the law and interpreters of the law. They were scholars. They did a fine job of teaching the traditions that had been passed down for generations. People looked to the scribes to learn how God's law should be applied to their lives. But the teaching that Jesus was doing was different.

When Jesus taught he embodied every word he spoke. His knowledge wasn't gained from years of study, but was naturally a part of him. It was first-hand knowledge, not something that was handed down to him. It was neither

rehearsed nor off-the-cuff. His words came from deep down inside. His words revealed him. When he talked of God, it seemed as though he was talking about himself. Every word he spoke mattered. With every gesture, every expression, and every action, Jesus expanded and fulfilled his teaching. He taught with
AUTHORITY.

“Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, *What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.*”

Unlike the people, the unclean spirit is not at all astounded by Jesus’ teaching. The spirit knows exactly who Jesus is. The spirit is afraid of him, and rightfully so. Jesus rebuked him, saying, *Be silent, and come out of him!* And the unclean spirit, convulsing [the man] and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.”

Jesus spoke, and the unclean spirit was gone. It’s almost disappointing; this exorcism is not nearly as dramatic as we expect it to be. While Mark writes that the

people were amazed, it is odd that they didn't seem upset or distracted by the unclean spirit. Their focus is still on Jesus and his teaching. Most of us probably would describe this scene with the unclean spirit as an interruption of the teaching, where the teacher has to put down the book and deal with the unruly child. But the people in the synagogue receive Jesus' response to this disruption as part of his teaching. "They kept on asking one another, *What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.*"

Jesus supports his words with actions, with miracles, with healing. Jesus commands and the demons obey.

This is what it means to teach with AUTHORITY. It's not just the words Jesus speaks, but the fact that his words are followed by actions. Jesus not only interprets the scriptures, he demonstrates them, he lives them, he incarnates them, he brings them to life. Furthermore, he doesn't merely identify the demons; he faces them and drives them out.

Jesus' authority, of course, comes from his identity. He is the Son of God, after all - the Holy One of God, as the demon described him. But the people in the synagogue that day did not know who Jesus was, even after he healed the man of the unclean spirit. The authority they recognize comes through healing power and through integrity.

We all know people who are eloquent speakers and quite knowledgeable in their area of expertise. But that's where it ends. They're just full of hot air. They don't walk the talk. They tell their children, "Do as I say, not as I do." They don't practice what they preach. They are all talk and no action.

I think of Reverend Renita Green as an example of one who *does* practice what she preaches. Three years ago, she opened what is now known as The People's Shelter, a safe and warm space for our homeless neighbors to sleep when it's dangerously cold outside. She didn't just announce that she was going to do this and then open the doors of her church and wait for them to come. She went out into the cold and the dark looking for them and urging them to come. She still does this. She arranges to provide an evening meal and breakfast, as well as a sack lunch they can take with them. The church has installed a shower for them. There are

cots with sheets and blankets. She gives them clean socks to put on before they go to bed. Many in the community - including First Presbyterian - have supported her efforts with funds, with donations of clothing and other items, and by volunteering. And - I love this - Renita often tells them a bedtime story and prays with and for them as they drift off to sleep.

Of course, we can only hope to approximate the kind of authority that Jesus had. But if we are striving to be his followers, then we need to strive to reach his level of integrity. To support our words with our actions and with our lives. That's when words become powerful; when we put them into action. Without it, our words are empty.

We are here to learn from Jesus and to continue his teaching and healing. It's the only way that God's authority will be known and accepted; when we take the words off the pages of scripture and take them with us and share them out in the world through our hands and feet.

I love this quote from ancient mystic, Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

May we embody Christ and be the AUTHORITY of Christ, to the glory of God!

AMEN.