

“With Authority”
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Mark 1:21-28

Jesus’ public ministry begins with his confronting the powers and principalities of the physical and spiritual worlds. Listen for and hear God’s word to us in Mark’s message today.

Mark 1: 21-28

Our lesson this morning says that Jesus’ hearers are astonished, for he taught them as one having authority. This was a surprising experience for them. Jesus was not a famous person back then. His ministry was just beginning. He was the son of a carpenter from a place called Nazareth. He had not studied under anyone famous, and yet, he knew the scriptures. What was even more amazing to them was the way he acted and spoke. It was as if he was intimately acquainted with God.

We are a people who challenge the authority of governments, of businesses, of one another. That famous bumper sticker from the 60’s—“Question Authority”’—is still seen on cars driving down our roads. As a child of the 60’s, I grew up challenging the authority of any group who tried to direct my life. After Vietnam and Watergate, my father and I had to stop discussing religion and politics. Does this sound familiar to any of you?

People in Jesus’ day had respect for authority. They took for granted that the military, the government, and the religious establishment had power over their lives. Once they knew the name of someone, and by whose authority they acted, people listened lest they offend those with power over them.

When Jesus showed up teaching in the temple, he was a no-body in the eyes of the people. He didn’t have any credentials—he hadn’t built a name for himself. He didn’t have the authority of any group behind him. So when this possessed man recognizes him and challenges Jesus’ right to be there, the people are confused. Jesus doesn’t become defensive; he doesn’t, at this point, claim authority from God. He simply orders out the unclean spirit. Jesus lets his words and actions speak for him. And the people are amazed.

The gospel of Mark should be the favorite book of teachers because Jesus begins his ministry—teaching. His first miracle happens in the context of this lesson. We don’t know what he was saying to the crowd, but they were amazed by the authority it conveyed. Jesus taught and the people were healed by his words. Isn’t that part of the reason we come to church? Don’t we hope to hear words that will change us and give meaning to our lives?

“A recent study by the Search Institute says that one of the greatest needs in the contemporary church, and one of the most frequently requested ministries, is the ministry of teaching. ‘People are looking for answers, for somewhere to stand, for an explanation

of what is going on in them and in their world,' said one of the commentators on the study." (Lectonaid)

There is a tension in this text and in the commentaries this week between the roles of teacher and prophet. There is much support for the need for ministers today to be teachers within their congregations—to encourage the study of scripture and lively discussions about the issues that affect our lives as Christians. People claim to want to be shown where they can find the answers to the real questions in their lives. Most ministers, however, express their frustration about how few folks actually attend bible studies or discussion groups.

Many people also claim to want their pastors to be prophetic, to challenge the powers and principalities that promote evil and violence in the world. But pastors will tell you how lonely it is around the church after a sermon that challenges the congregation to action to end their own complicity in promoting systems and industries that oppress others.

Think about how offended you might be if I were to preach a scathing sermon against the build up of munitions if you worked at Pratt & Whitney or Electric Boat; or the environment, if you worked in logging, mining or oil production. What if the sermon was about the evils of gambling, and you worked for the casinos or the State Gaming Commission. How about the gouging of the consumers for prescription drugs if you worked for Pfizer? If I spoke ill of former President Bush or of Governor Rell, would you be upset if you were a Republican? Would you question, by whose authority I was able to say those things? I would. But the proof of a prophet is by how right the prophecies prove to be.

Several years ago I found a cartoon that I just loved. It has a personnel officer interviewing an elderly man in sandals. He says: "So, Mr. Isaiah, you think you have the gift of prophesy, do yah? Well, let's just see what the Gifts Assessment Test revealed—shall we?"

Time has clearly proven the rightness of Isaiah's prophecies, and few would challenge that he spoke for God. Time has proven the rightness of Jesus' words, and few would challenge that he spoke for God. But, not all of the people in Isaiah or Jesus' day believed in them. Not everyone believed that his message was from God.

One of my favorite commentators, Ralph Milton focuses more directly on the challenge to the forces that divide us. He says: "In our super-rationalist world, many of us put very little stock in 'unclean spirits' or 'demons' or 'the forces of darkness'. If you can't measure it, or describe it objectively, it doesn't exist. But it means we have no way of talking about the reality of evil that's evident in people and institutions and businesses.

"Whether we think these words are metaphors or describe a reality, we still need some way of coming to grips with the dark side of human experience. Going beyond objective knowledge to the kind of insight that constitutes wisdom, we need that kind of language. Because all of us have demons we need to exorcise. Institutions (including

churches) can become demonic. I have a strong sense that the larger any organization grows (I think of the huge corporate mergers happening around us) the less it is able to respond to human values, much less holy values.

“So what demons do we need to name and how do we plan to deal with them?” (Rumors, 2-22-06)

A couple of years ago, a clergy discussion website was buzzing with discussions around this text. New clergy were seeking wisdom from seasoned clergy about how to address these issues of demons and getting rid of them. Many danced around their statements, not wanting to be quoted saying they believed in demons. Others were outspoken about the need to name the evil. In the end, we all wished that we felt we had more of Jesus’ authority. Jesus tells us we have it—but few of us feel it. And, in light of what has happened to our economy because of corporate corruption, many wish someone had spoken out earlier.

People of faith, we must let the authority of the scriptures, the weight of religious tradition, and our own revelation from God determine by whose authority we will speak out or act. By these same standards, we must discern when it is right for us to follow another, or to get involved in a cause.

Kaj Munk, was a Danish pastor who was murdered by the Nazis because of his opposition to the persecution of Jews. He said, “Perhaps all this talk about God and Jesus Christ and the salvation of man is just a collection of fairy tales. And I am a minister. I am in the employment of Jesus Christ and for this work the Danish government pays me 40,000 crowns as a salary. Perhaps this is a mistake too. Perhaps it is a mistake to preach love and forgiveness in a hate-torn world, to rescue those who are in need, to teach children, to comfort the lonely and the dying. But if it is a mistake, then it is a beautiful mistake. If Christianity should turn out to be true after all, then unbelief will have been a very ugly mistake...” (Aha! 2-3-03)

We are living in a time when there are many social issues that compete for our attention. There are religious leaders on all sides of these issues. We are often asked to get involved—to stand up for something. I might even be one of those who ask you to get involved. Just remember that people of faith are always on the front lines of social issues. We try to emulate Jesus in this regard. But the challenge will always be to determine what is right and by whose authority you act. Let the commandments of love and mercy, and Jesus’ actions guide you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.