

## The Right Kind of Authority

Mark 1:21-28

January 29, 2012

They went to Capernaum;  
and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.  
They were astounded at his teaching,  
for he taught them as one having authority,  
and not as the scribes.  
Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out,  
“What have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?  
Have you come to destroy us?  
I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”  
But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!”  
And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.  
They were all amazed, and they kept asking one another,  
“What is this? A new teaching – with authority!  
He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”  
At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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What was it that Jesus taught?

In Mark’s gospel, we hear quite a bit about the fact that Jesus taught, and we hear a lot about the *places* where Jesus taught: in today’s passage it is in the synagogue. Other passages we see Jesus teaching in the Temple, on hillsides, in the streets, standing in a boat, to the crowds.

What we almost never hear in Mark is the *content* of what Jesus taught.

Of course, we can make some assumptions. Jesus was a good Jew. He was a student of scripture. Certainly, Jesus’ teaching was focused on interpreting God’s word.

But during Jesus’ ministry, there were other teachers that did the same thing: rabbis, chief priests, Pharisees, scribes. These kinds of folks were the teachers with the credentials. They were the ones whose scholarship people were supposed to trust.

Yet in Mark’s gospel, when Jesus taught, two things were clear: first, Jesus had an authority about him that stopped people in their tracks. And,

second, the more Jesus taught, the more angry the scribes and the chief priests and the Pharisees became. Something about Jesus' teaching just burned them up. Something about Jesus teaching flew in the face of whatever it was they were teaching. Indeed, something about Jesus' teaching led them to chase Jesus all the way to the cross.

But what?

Well...we don't exactly know.

In Mark's gospel, we don't get lesson plans.  
What we get is Jesus' life.

In Mark, we see Jesus *living* what he taught by inviting all the wrong people to sit with him at the table: with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners...oh my!

In Mark, we see Jesus *living* what he taught by valuing the humanity of a person over the rigor of the religious rules. Jesus healed people on the Sabbath day; he reached out to touch those who are considered "unclean." In Mark, we see Jesus *living* what he taught by admitting that there are limits to what we can know about God. When asked about what would happen at the end of the age, Jesus replied, "Of that day and of that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the son, but only God."

In Mark, we see Jesus *living* what he taught by meeting people where they were and respecting their unwillingness to take "no" for an answer. Jesus admires the faith of the Syrophonecian woman who negotiates with him to make her daughter well; he commends the friends of a paralyzed man who break through the roof so that their friend might be healed.

So what about all of this is different than what the scribes, and Pharisees, and chief priests were teaching? They were using the same Bible. Probably even the same translation. Why the different conclusions? Why would Jesus' interpretation of the scripture be such a threat?

Well...we don't exactly know.

We don't know what the scribes and the Pharisees and the chief priests were teaching, either. Mark doesn't record their counter-arguments to

Jesus' teaching. But what we do know is that for them, boundaries were important. Boundaries between the clean and the unclean. Between the holy and the unholy.

We know that for the religious leaders that opposed Jesus' teaching, they sometimes seemed more interested in upholding tradition and the letter of the law than they were in caring for the people who followed the tradition and for whom the law was given.

It's curious that in this gospel we hear evidence of competing teachings, yet we almost never hear the content of teaching.

And I wonder if maybe the reason Mark doesn't feel the need to share with us the content of these competing lessons plans is because the evidence of good teaching is not found in knowing the right things to say, but instead is found in a life that embodies the lessons that have been learned. As Bible scholar and preacher Barbara Lunblad suggests, in the gospel of Mark, "Jesus himself is the content of the teaching."<sup>1</sup>

The drama that plays out in Mark's gospel – which begins with today's passage about Jesus teaching at the synagogue in Capernaum – is who gets to represent God. Will it be Jesus, or will it be the well-educated religious establishment? Who will be in charge? As a friend of mine says, that question – of who gets to speak for (and interpret) God and God's word is one that the church has been wrestling with since the day the church was founded.<sup>2</sup>

I challenge you to consider where you have experienced the church – or, more basically, Christian people – divided; when you've seen church people at odds. Overwhelmingly, the issues that divide us stem from that question of who gets to represent God; from who gets to claim that their interpretation of scripture is correct; from who gets to assert that they are the authority when it comes to defining the faith.

What I notice about the way that Jesus teaches is that his authority seems effortless. Gaining authority was not Jesus' goal. It simply was an outgrowth of who Jesus was. Take today's passage. When Jesus strolls into First Church Capernaum, his authority is evident not only to Mr. and Mrs.

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<sup>1</sup> "A Different Kind of Authority," a sermon on Day1.org by the Rev. Dr. Barbara Lunblad.

<sup>2</sup> With thanks to the Rev. Heather Grace Shortlidge, and her paper on this scripture (The Well, Austin, 2011).

John Q Pewsitter in the synagogue, but even to the unclean spirits...to the hidden forces of this world that resist God's reign.

The reason, I think, that Jesus' authority seems so effortless is that, then as now, people are drawn to authenticity. People know authenticity when they see it...and more than a well-reasoned argument, or a perfectly executed lesson plan, or even an appeal to the ways things have always been done...it is authenticity that connects with people; it is authenticity that draws people in...

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Wednesday of last week I attended a meeting for an organization on whose board I serve. The organization is called Hope for the Homeless; its purpose is to be an umbrella for homeless service providers across the city so that we can work together to maximize efficiency and reduce duplication of services.

What I just described is an important part of Hope for the Homeless' mission – but last week I discovered another, more important, reason that the organization exists.

It is our practice, at the end of each meeting, for the 30-40 representatives from agencies across Shreveport-Bossier go through an exercise where someone presents a hypothetical client case in order that the group can come up with a solution to provide care for the person. Most of the time, what ends up happening is that the rules and stipulations and restrictions that each agency (understandably) has about who they can help makes it pretty difficult to find a solution.

Last Wednesday at the meeting, a case-worker presented the group not a hypothetical scenario, but an actual person...a homeless woman whose problems were extensive: severe mental illness, chronic drug use, prostitution, and a history of being physically abused. After the case worker described the woman there was an uneasy silence in the room. No one seemed to know what to do, or how to help.

In the silence of that moment, the Executive Director of Hope the Homeless spoke up. She reminded us that no matter the rules and stipulations and restrictions each agency had, it was the job of the people in that room to make sure that this woman could find help; that no matter how difficult the

situation might be, no one else in the city was in the position that we were to make sure that she was treated like a human being.

People respond to authenticity. They know it when they see it.

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Just as there was in Capernaum when Jesus first entered the synagogue to teach, there is a debate going on in the Church about who gets to claim the mantle of authority when it comes to speaking about God and God's word.

But rather than succumbing to the temptation to defend our side and define ourselves against this expression of the faith or that one in order that we might prove ourselves to be right, or best, or superior...perhaps what we should do is let our life together as a community speak for what we believe.

Perhaps our authority can come from the ways that we embody what Jesus came to teach – by loving and serving and giving and sacrificing for the same people Jesus did.

And, perhaps, that kind of witness might be compelling those in our world who have grown tired of a church that only seems concerned with arguing over its sole claim to authority.

**PRAYER: Guide us, O God, in our journey of faith by the authority of your Word. And help us to interpret that Word through the lens of the Word made Flesh – Jesus Christ, our Lord, whose life, death, and resurrection shows us how to live. Amen.**