

As One with Authority

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
January 29, 2012, Annual meeting Sunday

Mark 1:21-28

So you come to church on a Sunday, and it's not much new, seems like any other Sunday. Perhaps you come for a little time of quiet contemplation in the midst of busy lives...a time for a little centering and serenity. And then Gene announces that we have a guest preacher today, an up and coming young minister who is beginning to make quite a name for himself. Our guest gets up to preach. But before he can even open his mouth, a clearly disturbed man stands up in the congregation and cries out. Indeed he, or whatever it is that possesses him, begins to scream at our guest: "What have you to do with us? Are you here to destroy us? All these people may not know who you are, but I know who you are." Interesting how evil always recognizes this guest preacher.

The preacher looks at the man, then commands him, or whatever it is that has a hold of him, to shut up and get out of here. Before you know it, the man sits down - completely healed from whatever it was that was tormenting him. He is at peace, he is healed, even as the rest of us remain rather shaken by all that has just taken place. Now that would be a Sunday you would not soon forget. But all I can say about that is...welcome to worship with Jesus. Says one pastor, "There are times when we're all settled in for the Sabbath, neatly seated in all of our rows of pews, every pew bolted down, following the order of worship, just like any other Sunday. But there are other times when worship is wild and unpredictable, not because the minister or worship planners are trying to keep us on our toes, but because Jesus shows up." Jesus shows up, bringing with him that edgy, chaotic, unpredictable Kingdom of God. Jesus shows up and in the synagogue, in the church, in a place of serenity, security and tradition, a new power is revealed, demonic forces are frightened, people are astonished - frightened and astonished because "he teaches as one with authority."

Now when I was in college – and yes, I can still remember those days – you could hardly go anywhere without seeing a button or a t-shirt that proclaimed, "Question Authority," or maybe "Never trust anyone over thirty." We were all about questioning authority, doing our own thing, marching to our own drummer. Of course, now many of us have grandchildren, an SUV and a mortgage, but hopefully we still have a little healthy skepticism about anyone who goes around claiming authority. So this might be a challenging text for some of us...a text pointing to Jesus as one who teaches with "authority." What does it mean to speak of Jesus and authority in the same sentence? And what is the nature of this authority?

A story some of you have heard from me before, told by my mentor in ministry, Bill Nelson. He says, "A friend of mine marched through the jungles of New Guinea during the Second World War. While there, he encountered an indigenous people whom he found to be living a peaceful but curiously superstitious form of Christianity. Through an interpreter, he talked with them about some of their rather unfamiliar and peculiar – to him - customs, and he showed some obvious distaste for some of them. But one of the senior leaders of the tribe got right to the point when he looked at my friend and said, "Before we followed Jesus as Lord, we would have cooked and eaten you." Well, could that be a clue to Jesus' authority...his ability to change lives, to alter perspectives, to change priorities, to lead people in an entirely new direction? Perhaps...

A second story: Many years ago, a Christian missionary found himself in an isolated and obscure Chinese village. A crowd gathered and listened to him with surprising attentiveness as he told them the story of Jesus. They seemed to know the story so well that finally he had to ask, "Do you know this Jesus?"

"Oh yes," a village leader replied, "we know him." They then took this rather surprised missionary out to a small cemetery and showed him the grave of an English medical missionary from another century. This was who they thought of when they heard the name, Jesus. And one could argue that yes, they had known Christ; that in the caring and compassion of that doctor, Jesus was truly in their midst. Well, could that be a clue to his authority...his teaching of a whole new way, the way of selfless service, of giving our lives to find true life? Perhaps...

Now of course, this would be a much easier sermon to preach if we just knew what Jesus had said on that dramatic day in Capernaum. Was it good theology? Did he have a way of making complicated concepts understandable? I wish I knew. Trouble is, Mark doesn't tell us anything about the content of Jesus' preaching. What we see are results: evil confronted and defeated, a man healed, authority established and acknowledged, and worshippers finding it all utterly astonishing. And maybe that's all we need.

As I was learning the art of preaching – actually I'm always learning and re-learning the art of preaching – I took seriously the advice, "The purpose of the preacher is to take the gospel and make it relevant to the daily lives of the congregation." And I still try to do that – to find a word, a story, that

somehow reveals God's word, that somehow narrows that gap between God and us. But after reflecting on that rather wild and reckless worship in Capernaum, I find myself wondering if there might not be something more to this preaching task than simply the search for relevance.

Writes one colleague, "When I was a young pastor, I decided to find out what people really got out of a sermon. So one Sunday, at the end of the service, after I had preached, I had a young acolyte hand out to random people, as they were leaving the church, a sheet of paper. The paper had one question on it: What idea do you remember from today's sermon? Well, the results were rather depressing. Few of the papers returned could remember even one idea from my sermon. And some of the papers, when they listed an idea, listed the wrong one! They listed ideas that had never appeared in my sermon!" Ah, the joys of public speaking.

He continues, "I was disheartened. But as I was discussing my discouragement with a wise woman in our congregation, she asked me, 'Where did you get the idea that sermons are about ideas? Everybody knows that the purpose of a sermon is to meet Jesus and to be amazed that he hasn't given up on us yet.'"

Concludes this pastor, "I knew immediately that she was right. You come here, not so much to receive information or instruction. You come here to be astonished, to meet a Jesus who's utterly astonishing."

Now yes, I have a couple of diplomas in my office, a certificate of ordination, now a Citizen of the Year plaque, lots of papers scattered on my desk, all of which say to anyone who might have any doubts, that I have earned the right, the authority, to be here to preach and minister among you. Jesus has none of that. He doesn't teach or preach as one with doctrinal authority; he doesn't claim to know theology forwards and backwards. No spiritual platitudes on his lips, no books to sign. But, when he speaks, things happen. When he speaks, the very power of God is let loose. His word becomes action – again, people are released from the forces of evil, a worship service becomes a place of healing, cherished prejudices die and beloved idols are disrupted as we meet a God we perhaps didn't expect, a God who can be comforting and nurturing, and a God who can also be wild and unpredictable. And this gives his preaching and teaching an astonishing authority, as we see in his words, his life, just about as much of God as we can ever hope to see. His word becomes action. And that's authority!

Now this could be a whole other sermon, but I just want to pause for a moment and acknowledge that perhaps we're not all real comfortable with this whole demon possession thing which we find in this text. And I'm not asking that you take it literally. But what I am asking you to see is how the demonic forces fear him. I'm asking that you see how evil is confronted and defeated, I'm asking you to see that the power of liberation is released, and I'm asking you to believe that such a power can even touch you, a power that can release you from whatever demons might be tormenting you or gripping you tightly. I'm asking that you hear in his teaching, not just a word of information, but a word of transformation. I'm asking that you allow yourselves to be astounded by the one who comes among us and who speaks as one with authority.

Now this week, as I was thinking about our church, this worship, today's annual meeting, a year ahead which will see us begin and hopefully complete the construction of our new building, I came across this story told by United Methodist Bishop, William Willimon: He says, "A friend of mine, a pastor of an African American congregation that worships in the midst of a dilapidated inner city, was proudly showing me around his new church. The sanctuary had been built and just dedicated at a cost of over two million dollars (and this was six or eight years ago). He showed me the organ, the grand pulpit, the vast seating capacity. I was duly impressed. But after our tour, I asked him, 'Sam, are you at all bothered by the fact that your congregation has spent this much money on this fine building in the middle of a neighborhood where there's such terrible poverty?'

"Sam shook his head in some chagrin and aggravation, smiling to himself at the question. 'You white folk just can't stand for people to have a good time, can you, particularly if it's black folk having a good time. This is more than a building. This place is a sermon, and that sermon says, 'If there is ugliness, poverty and despair around you, it's not because God intended it that way. Come inside here and discover what God meant for you.' This church is a free space where folk can get a chance to stand up, to shout, to move. This church is a sign, a witness, an act of defiance against the ugliness of the world as it is.'"

Well, hopefully our new building, all of our spaces, all of our time together, can be that kind of space...a space where a new authority is revealed and people are astounded...astounded by healing, by hope, by both peace and unpredictability, astounded by a God who is still speaking and always doing a new thing, a God whose word becomes action, a God who has not given up on us and who seems determined to be with us no matter what. Now finally, of course, this is all completely out of my hands; it is out of your hands. God's going to have the last word here and who knows what wild and astounding stunts God may attempt through me and through you as we continue this journey together.