

A New Teaching With Authority
Mark 1.21-28
January 31, 2021, Annual Meeting Sunday
Rev. Tim Phillips



Mark 1.21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Thank you, Pastor Patricia.

And may the words of my mouth – such as they are - and the meditations they may invite in our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O God our rock and our redeemer.

Well, it hasn't gotten any better. My frustration with the timing of the gospel of Mark continues.

Last week I talked about the "now" of Jesus' call to a future we have been dreaming of and the "immediate" response of those who follow him in that mission.

I want to know what it was about Jesus that caused this immediate response, including leaving everything behind. I want to know what and how and why.

And Mark doesn't fill in any of the details. Mark moves fast. And I want to slow down and understand.

But maybe there is method in Mark's madness. Perhaps he gives us the bare details of the story in order to leave room for us, like Godly Play, to wonder; to wonder about what would motivate us to leave everything behind for the future we are dreaming of; to wonder about what makes us hesitate; to wonder about what it feels like to be old Zebedee left in the boat; to wonder where we are in the story.

From baptism in the River Jordan and the temptation in the wilderness to the Sea of Galilee where Jesus calls Simon and Andrew and James and John, Mark jumps to Capernaum.

He leaves out the details from Luke where Jesus *first* goes back to his hometown and preaches to his neighbors. That's where he quotes Isaiah 61: "The Spirit is upon me to preach good news to the poor, give sight to the blind, set the oppressed free and to proclaim that *this* is the year of God's favor" – now is the time. When he sits down, everyone is looking at him, and he says, "Today, this scripture is *fulfilled* in your hearing." Just like Jesus is preaching in Mark ...

Except, when Jesus offers some examples of what he means that include the healing of some of his hometown's historic enemies, the people get so angry with him that they try to throw him off a cliff. And Jesus never returns to Nazareth again. He never goes home again. Instead, he moves on to Capernaum.

Mark skips over all that unpleasantness and just sends Jesus directly to Capernaum where he enters the synagogue and begins to preach. And the people are so enthralled by his teaching that they recognize some kind of "authority" in it.

And once again, Mark doesn't tell us anything about what Jesus says. He doesn't reveal the markers of his authority. We don't get the profound three points of his sermon. We only know that the message resonated in such a way that folks recognized this was something different from the power of the current religious establishment.

Ok, Yes! But why? How? What did Jesus say that demonstrated a different kind of authority than the kind exercised by the designated "authorities" of the day?

We are left to wonder.

I wonder when there was a teaching or some message you heard that suddenly put things in perspective and made sense of the world for you in some new way. I wonder if you have ever experienced some flash of insight in a moment without words. I wonder if you remember some profound "aha" moment that held the possibility of changing your life. I wonder what you did with it.

But Mark doesn't let us linger for long. As is his way, *immediately* he moves on to this scene of a "person with an 'unclean' spirit."

Right there in the middle of the faith community. Imagine! An "unclean spirit" right there in the middle of the faith community!

Bible scholar, Dr. Ofelia Ortega, says that we shouldn't see this person as someone who is willfully given over to destruction. This is someone who is "*possessed*:" whose own will is overridden by forces that control his mind with loud voices that render him unable to think for himself and control his body so that he has no capacity for any meaningful action.

He is enslaved, in other words, a prisoner oppressed by a power that undermines his humanity.

This sounds as scary as it does familiar.

There are those forces, sometimes right in the middle of our faith communities, or in our nation, or in ourselves, that take control of our minds and bodies so that we are no longer free to be the humans we were created to be.

There are those religious voices that claim “authority” as the power they *alone* have to define us and control us and to speak for us. If we give in to that authority, they threaten to make us less human and less free.

There are the voices in our nation that claim governmental power as their personal plaything, wielding it to dis-empower all other voices. If we give in to that authority, they threaten to make us less human and less free.

And let me stop to say that I am absolutely convinced that this nation is a long way from the kin-dom of God. But this national struggle over authority and the exercise of power will make us have to decide what we believe is the best approximation for the freedom and flourishing of our God-given humanity.

And I, for one, choose multi-racial, multi-religious democracy over white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and authoritarianism. Just because I am committed to the separation of Church and State, does not mean I do not have an opinion about what kind of national aspirations move us toward freedom and the fullness of human value.

And there is more. There are the loud voices around us and inside our own heads that tell us we are worthless, useless, and ineffective and we are inevitably slaves of our upbringing, our failures, and our addictions – or at least to those small accommodations we make to the things we *know* will compromise our humanity and our freedom. If we surrender to the authority of those voices, they will make us less human and less free.

All along, this poor guy was right there in the middle of the faith community and no one – none of the so-called religious “authorities” – did anything to help liberate him and to call out his value as a living, breathing member of the human family. Maybe they ignored him or berated him or did their best to make him invisible. But there he was. And no one in the leadership did anything to help release him from his captivity.

On this, Mark is clear. Whatever Jesus was teaching, that “authority” people immediately recognized in him was the exercise of his power to silence the voices of slavery and to liberate him into the freedom of his human value.

That was something new!

Dr. Ortega says:

What is this? A new doctrine, set forth with authority! Amid so many voices, one voice finally resounds ... [A new teaching] that produces healing actions. That word liberates the earth from the forces of evil and makes our world habitable for the human being; [this] word guides the church to create spaces of freedom and places of healing and communion.

So, now I'm wondering – on this Annual Meeting Sunday - about whether we see ourselves as having that kind of power.

Dr. Ortega reminds us that just two chapters later in Mark, Jesus is giving this “authority” – this exercise of power – to his followers.

The Godly Play story this morning was about a sower. Is there anything more powerful than someone who sows seeds?

Bob reminded me of that prayer honoring the murdered Archbishop Oscar Romero:
*We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast [that was last week's Godly Play story]. We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.*

Like the sower, we have this amazing power of seeding the world with love and justice.

So, I wonder. I wonder if and where we see it.

There is that line from Marianne Williamson that “our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.” I may have issues with some of Marianne Williamson's ideas but this line, especially today, makes me stop and wonder.

The thing about Jesus in all the gospels is that he seems intent on giving whatever authority he has away. He doesn't seem interested in inherited authority or institutional authority. And he isn't all that impressed by the claims of imperial authority. His passion seems to be the real authority that comes from exercising his power to seed *us* with the power to love and liberate.

There is that passage I like to quote from Ephesians chapter 3. I hope you don't ever get tired of hearing it because there is a power already at work within you that is able to accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine.

So, I wonder. What is the power we have? As Dr. Ortega asks: Where is our power to create spaces of freedom and places of healing and communion?

Well, maybe part of the answer is in that homecoming hymn that centers us and calls us, “Bring Us Home.”

Whatever the forces that would pull us apart, we keep singing “bring us home.”

However homeless we feel or those around us feel, we keep singing “bring us home.”

Whenever the voices around us and inside our own heads are so loud that we cannot think straight and we cannot remember the way to get there, we keep singing “bring us home.”

Even when we have lost our imagination about a place where everyone belongs, we keep singing “bring us home.”

We have the power and no one can take our authority away to use it.

So today, if you hear that voice – if you hear your own voice - do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

“Mark 1.21-28,” Ofelia Ortega in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), pp.308-313. The Oscar Romero prayer is actually a tribute to him by Fr. Untener of Saginaw, MI in 1979. It is available at www.usccb.org. “Bring Us Home,” was written by Dr. Rodney Romney as a hymn for Seattle First Baptist Church in response to the death of a young gay man with AIDS who was rejected by his family. The music is by Peter Strauch.