

The Right Kind of Authority

Mark 1:21-28

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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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There aren't many hard and fast rules when it comes to preaching, but I suppose one of them is that when the scripture you read on Sunday morning mentions an exorcism you should probably say something about it.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus' first public act of his adult ministry was to give the Sermon on the Mount. In Luke's gospel it was to give a sermon in his home synagogue. In John's gospel, the first thing Jesus did was a miracle of abundance when he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

Mark has Jesus introducing himself to the world by performing an exorcism. It's a rather strange way to take the stage – and it begs the question of why?

It's not every day that you see an exorcism. I've never seen one – never been taught how to perform one – but I have heard of an exorcism. A few months before I started my first job as a pastor in Richmond, Virginia, they had something very much like an exorcism during the 11:00 worship service.

As it was told to me, everything about the service that day seemed normal at first. The congregation gathered. There was beautiful music at the prelude. The pastor gave the announcements and then worship began. Midway through the first hymn, the adult son on

an older couple shuffled into the sanctuary. He was a member of the church – was baptized, confirmed, came to youth group on Sunday nights as a teenager. He went off to college, and while there it became clear that he suffered from the terrible mental illness of schizophrenia. Unable to get control of his illness with medication, this man drifted in and out of being able to function in society – often living through bouts of homelessness. On this particular Sunday, he entered his home church and sat behind his parents in a pew near the front of the sanctuary.

As you might imagine, those in the congregation who knew about this family's situation were on edge. During the sermon, given by the associate pastor (and my future colleague), Janet noticed that the man sitting behind his parents had stood up. Then, without warning, he began to strike his father with a coat hanger that he pulled from his jacket. It was a shocking scene – and no one knew what to do or how to make it stop.

That is when my future colleague, Janet, stopped preaching her sermon, walked out of the pulpit, and in a loud voice said: "In the name of Jesus Christ, stop what you are doing now!" As I've been told, Janet's words echoed throughout the sanctuary – and the man stopped, looked at her squarely in the eye, and then walked out of the church.

We know, of course, that people who suffer from mental illnesses like schizophrenia do not have "unclean spirits," but rather, a chemical imbalance in their brains that need to be managed. What Janet did that morning in church did not rid that man of his mental illness, but there was something about what she said that penetrated through his hallucination and caused him to stop.

I bet if you think hard enough – and in the right categories – you have seen or heard of an exorcism, too.

Perhaps you know of someone who had a lifetime to develop racial prejudice – maybe even actively practice racism. Someone who learned to hate another group of people for so long that they could not imagine what life would be like if that hate were not a part of it. Perhaps someone who lived in South Africa, or Rwanda, or Pakistan, or even the United States.

Or maybe you know someone whose love for money led them to put everything else in their life in service to their greed – their family, their friends, their colleagues, or the common good.

Or maybe you know someone who is so focused on themselves that they have lost perspective about how that self is connected to the rest of the world – someone whose narcissism blinds them from even noticing other people.

If you know anybody like this, then you might be able to think of an example of a time when something happened in their lives that penetrated through their sickness. Maybe a moment, or a series of moments that helped the scales fall away from their eyes so that they recognized the value in a person of another race, or the relative insignificance of the

money they had accumulated, or the proper place of the self as a part...and not the center of...the world. If you've known someone who has had that kind of transformation – even if it less dramatic than the story I told you about the incident in my former church – then you've witnessed an exorcism.

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Every exorcism is about recognizing authority.

The man who acted out in church recognized the authority of my colleague who confronted him in Jesus' name.

The person who is racist, or greedy, or a narcissist recognizes the authority of a truth that exposes their shallow understanding of the world.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus' first public act of ministry was really less about an exorcism and more about people recognizing Jesus' authority as the Son of God – even the people like the man with an unclean spirit, who nobody else could reach, but who immediately recognized Jesus as “the Holy One of God.”

What is it that gives a person authority? You can buy a lot of books on Amazon.com trying to figure that one out. From personal experience I know that one characteristic that lends authority is a person's height.

As part of my seminary education, all of us had to spend a summer in a hospital as an intern in the chaplain's office. Part of the job of a chaplain is to make rounds and visit patients in their hospital rooms – to remind them that they are not alone and to talk with them if they have a need. I remember entering one room on a day that I wore a jacket and tie to the hospital. At six feet and five inches, I strode into the room of a family who were clearly looking for answers to their medical questions. It took a few minutes for me to realize that the family was directing their medical questions at me because I looked like I knew what I was talking about. Looks can be deceiving. When I showed them my hospital badge that said “chaplain intern” they were sorely disappointed. Height is not the best indicator of authority.

In the synagogue where Jesus came to teach, the currency of authority was an education and the ability to communicate tradition. Those who held positions of authority in the synagogue were the Scribes. These were people who had studied the Bible, read extensively, and offered interpretation. The problem with that interpretation was that, increasingly, the way the Scribes interpreted the scriptures left people on the margins of society – outside the boundaries of compassion – ostracized because they were considered to be unclean, or impure, or sinners, or those fallen from grace.

The pastor Gerhard Frost captures the problem that plagued the Scribes with a poem. He writes:

*When your options are either
to revise your beliefs*

*or to reject a person,
look again.
Any formula for living
that is too cramped
for the human situation
cries for rethinking.
Hardcover catechisms
are a contradiction
to our loose-leaf lives.¹*

When Jesus spoke in the synagogue, he read the same scriptures from which the Scribes taught, but the people heard him differently. Mark tells us that the people who heard Jesus teach were “astounded” – a word that captures perhaps both fascination and outrage at the same time. But what they recognized about Jesus and his teaching is that it carried with it a special kind of authority – and not as the Scribes.

Don’t you wonder what it was that Jesus taught that affected people in such a way? What did he say that was so different than the Scribes? He used the same Bible. What conclusions did he draw that the Scribes did not? What kind of “loose-leaf” lesson plan did Jesus teach?

What is interesting about the gospel of Mark is that we never hear what Jesus taught. Aside from a few parables, we don’t get the content of Jesus’ lesson plans. All we know is that when he taught in the synagogues, or the street corners, or in people’s homes, or in upper rooms – the people who heard him responded to his authority and the Scribes and the members of the religious establishment became increasingly angry.

There was something about Jesus’ message – a message that he started to teach in the synagogue in Capernaum – that led to an unavoidable conflict with the Scribes because it called into question their tradition and their authority. But Mark never gets specific about what those differences might be.

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.

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

¹ Frost, Gerhard, *Seasons of a Lifetime*, p.57 Augsburg Press, 1989

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 interrupt him and break through the roof so that their friend might be healed.

And I wonder if maybe the reason Mark doesn’t feel the need to share with us the content of Jesus’ lesson 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.”²

The drama that plays out in Mark’s gospel – which begins with today’s passage about Jesus teaching at the synagogue– 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 God and God’s word is one that the church has been wrestling with since the day the church was founded.³

I challenge you to consider where you have experienced the church – or, more basically, Christian people – divided. 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.

And yet, 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. When Jesus strolls into the synagogue in Capernaum, his authority is evident not only to members and the staff 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...

² “A Different Kind of Authority,” a sermon on Day1.org by the Rev. Dr. Barbara Lunblad.

³ With thanks to the Rev. Heather Grace Shortlidge, and her paper on this scripture (The Well, Austin, 2011).

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 who gets the claim authority.