

More Than Words

Mark 1:21-28

Preached FCCW

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The breaking news coming from the city of Capernaum was that the Jesus train was gathering steam and picking up passengers.

In the short space of just the first half of the opening chapter of his Gospel, Mark traces Jesus' rise to recognition from an opening endorsement by John the Baptist at the Jordan River, to a grass roots movement of gathering disciples in Galilee, to his breakout preaching engagement in Capernaum.

The reviews from the residents of this seaside city were peppered with words like "astounded" and "amazed." Even his fiercest opponents -- the unclean spirits -- grudgingly conceded defeat and were waving the white flag.

Mark sums up the mood of the Capernaum populace with the statement that people were "astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

Now, you can take Mark's assessment in one of two ways. You can read it as if the competency of the scribes always had been sub-par, but until Jesus came along with a teaching style that offered people a new benchmark of excellence, nobody had any idea of what they had been missing. The problem with that approach is that it makes the inferiority of the scribes' teaching the point of the story.

Clearly, though, what Mark wanted people to take from this episode is an awareness of the profoundly radical nature of Jesus' message. And there were better ways to do that than through a comparison between him, and a bunch of unqualified amateurs.

The truth is, the scribes did possess a substantial authority. They had the education and the training to teach people about God, based on what had been passed down to them from Moses and the Prophets.

As far as we know, Jesus didn't have any kind of authority that was conferred on him by anyone else. Yet, Jesus taught with authority surpassing the scribes, without the titles and formal education that they had. What exactly was this teaching that so astonished Jesus' hearers? Well, if all we had to go on was Mark's Gospel, we'd never know.

In some Bibles, every single word Jesus said is printed in red so that you can't miss it. There's a lot less red ink in the Gospel of Mark compared to the other Gospels. You won't find the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Mark, as it is in Matthew. You will find far fewer of Jesus' parables recorded in Mark, compared to the Gospel of Luke.

And we will never know what Jesus taught that day in Capernaum that blew people's minds based solely on Mark's version of the story. We only know how he taught. Which was "as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."

The one and only thing that Jesus said that day that Mark decided to write down for posterity, was spoken not to the congregation in the synagogue, but to a man possessed by an unclean spirit. It's significant that the man is said to have an unclean spirit, not an evil spirit, which is what we assume to be the case with someone who is possessed. In the Hebrew Scriptures, something or someone who was ritually unclean was tainted in some fashion that made them unfit for God's presence. People could be unclean by virtue of a conscious decision. Like eating pork or some other animal that was ritually unclean. But, a person could also be unclean due to circumstances over which they had no control. Like if they contracted a disease such as leprosy. Or, a woman could be unclean during certain times in her body's natural reproductive cycle.

When this man spots Jesus, he reacts with a dramatic recognition of Jesus' authority over the unclean spirit within him. He shrieks, "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." To which Jesus replied, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

That's it? Out of everything astonishing that Jesus had to say, *this* is what Mark thought it was important to remember?

Maybe, what Mark wants us to know is that Jesus' teaching authority was about more than the words themselves. It was about the effect his words had on people. Jesus' words had the power to do more than teach people *about* God. More than the power to astound and amaze. Jesus' words had the power to change lives; to heal and make whole. His teaching was about more than information. It was about transformation.

When Jesus commands the spirit to leave the man, and the spirit obeys, his words remove that which separated this man from a relationship with God. But his action of healing the possessed man, also transformed the crowd that day. It says they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."

I love how it says, "They *kept on* asking one another..." It's like they couldn't stop talking about what they had witnessed.

The difference in the authority of what the scribes taught and the authority of Jesus' teaching might be compared to the difference between two men who stood on a stage and recited the twenty-third psalm. One was a well-known actor, the other an old and not very sophisticated minister. The actor's rendering of the psalm was beautiful and commanding. Everyone enjoyed hearing the rich words of the beloved Shepherd psalm spoken in his clear baritone. All the inflections and pauses were perfect.

Then the old minister spoke. He stumbled over some of the words and his reading lacked the precise diction and tone that made the actor's delivery so appealing to the ear. But when he finished there were tears in the eyes of the listeners.

Something had happened and it was the actor who figured out what it was. "I know the psalm," he said, "but this man knows the shepherd."

The scribes knew the Psalms, the Law and the Prophets backwards and forwards. But Jesus knew the Shepherd. The source of Jesus' authority was not a learned thing. It emanated from within him, growing out of his relationship to his heavenly Father.

Jesus teaches us about the Kingdom whenever he heals someone who is suffering, or feeds a hungry crowd, or welcomes an outcast, or forgives a sinner. He even teaches us as he is dying on the cross -- where his authority triumphed over everything that separates us from a living relationship to God.

Mark concludes his report on that day in Capernaum with the observation that, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." In the third chapter of Mark, Jesus assembles twelve of his disciples and names them apostles -- which means those who are sent out to continue spreading the good news. Before he sends them out on their mission he gives them the authority not only to preach, but to cast out demons, too.

The authority of those apostles, like the authority of their teacher, was based on more than words. It was legitimized by the experience of their relationship to him. As Jesus' disciples, we are still called and authorized to heal and bless the world in Christ's name. Through Christ, we can offer freedom from the demons that haunt humanity and put distance between us and God -- demons like immorality, racism, materialism, addiction and pride.

The unique authority of Jesus resulting from his relationship to God and his relationship to each of us, is recognized in the Preamble to the Constitution of the UCC where it states: "The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, *Son of God and Savior*."

A little farther on, it also says: "The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the *whole church and every member* to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the gospel in church and society."

In the UCC there are different kinds of ministry that depend on an outward authorization by an ecclesial body. They are Commissioned Ministry, Licensed Ministry, and Ordained Ministry. As with the scribes of Jesus' time, each of these Authorized Ministries require certain standards of education and training. But, the whole church and every member are recognized as participants in the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in our lives.

The committees you serve on, the classes you teach, whatever you do to serve the church are actually ministries, and you are ministers. Ministers whose authority comes not through formal training or education, but through a direct and personal relationship to God in Jesus Christ.

If Mark's gospel contains less of Jesus' teaching words, it's because he wants to show us how every moment of Jesus' life was a sermon, unveiling the Kingdom of God for all to see. And the same can be true of your lives.

St. Francis once said, "Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." When we submit ourselves to Jesus' claim to authority in our lives, then the things Jesus taught -- like loving your neighbor as yourself -- will become to us more than words that we learn. They will be actions that we emulate. With time and faith, they will become a way of life. And as the gap between our words and our deeds is lessened, you and I will teach others what the kingdom of God is like, and we will do it with more than words. We will do it by example.

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