

"The New Authority"
Mark 1:21-28
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 2, 2009

If you gave this scripture passage from Mark's gospel to ten different preachers, chances are you end up with ten different sermons. There are so many themes found in these seven verses: there's the theme of demon possession, divine teaching and healing and then the distinction between the authority of Jesus over against the lack of authority of the scribes that was recognized by the people sitting in the pews that Sabbath morning.

I felt ambitious when I started preparing for this morning so I decided to combine all of these themes into one sermon. Let's again name the different themes: demon possession, divine healing and teaching, and authority.

Jesus goes to the synagogue and begins to teach. Right away the worshippers are impressed by his teaching, especially since he is not a professionally trained and licensed religious leader. He's not wearing the robes of a priest, he has no Ph.D. after his name, he's just a regular blue collar guy, a carpenter, and yet the people sense there is something different, even holy about Jesus. He has authority. When he speaks his listeners can only conclude they are hearing the voice of God.

Next Mark tells us that Jesus' teaching is suddenly interrupted by one of the members of the congregation who is possessed by an unclean spirit. The demon, even more than the worshippers recognizes Jesus' true identity. At the same time this unclean spirit is terrified by Jesus' authority. **"Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the holy one of God!"**

Immediately Jesus silences the unclean spirit, casts it out and restores the man to wholeness leaving the people more astounded than ever and Jesus' fame spreads quickly.

Let's now take a closer look at each of these themes. First, the unclean spirit. It's very discomfoting to realize that Jesus' first encounter with the power of evil after he begins his public ministry is in of all places, a house of the Lord, with a member of the worshipping congregation. What does this tell you? That God's people are not immune to the power of darkness. In fact the Evil One, Satan, the devil, or the powers and principalities of this present age, name it what you want, has a special interest in keeping God's people down, especially if you're on the growing edge. How often have you and I been sidetracked from our Christian walk because we have been captured by our fears, loneliness or jealousies, so much so that we even become afraid to spiritually grow, by risking ourselves and being vulnerable to the power of God and the needs of our neighbor? And these fears are fed by unclean taunting voices, **"You'll always be the same, you'll never be free, you'll always be a loser."** If you listen to these voices long enough, you start to believe them.

When this happens never forget that an unclean spirit is out of place in God's world, which is meant to be holy just as you were created in God's image to be holy. An

unclean spirit doesn't belong in your life anymore than a virus that has invaded a sterile operating room. The unclean spirit spreads chaos. It's a cancer that needs to be cut out.

When I was contemplating this passage I kept wondering, What was this man possessed with this unclean spirit doing in church? If he was held captive why did this unclean spirit let him attend the synagogue that morning? Then it hit me. That poor possessed, burdened man went to worship for the same reason you and I come to worship. You see, even though he was held captive by the powers of darkness, his captivity wasn't complete. This poor man was still also under the authority of God and God wasn't about to surrender and give up on him. So despite the chains weighing down his soul, this man dragged himself to worship hoping to encounter the power of God that would set him free. And it was in worship that he experienced the authority of Jesus and he was healed.

I hope you can identify with this man because in many ways his story is our story. Despite all that's wrong with you and me, we still keep looking for healing, until we finally find it through the authority of Jesus Christ.

I never cease to be amazed by those people whose lives are broken by sin or circumstances beyond their control, who still seek out the church for comfort and healing. More times than not this person recognizes that he or she has a problem. Sometimes this person is a member of a dysfunctional family who has been branded as the "**trouble maker**" or "the sick one," because he or she alone is able to identify the family's dysfunction. At the same time the rest of the family closes ranks against the "**sick one**" who threatens to force everybody else to take an honest and painful look at the family's sick interrelationships. So, the family bands together, "**We're all OK! It's him, he's the sick one.**"

Getting back to the story in Mark's gospel, notice how it is the one who is possessed, or troubled or broken, it's he, more than any other member of that synagogue, who is able to personally experience the power and authority of Jesus. The others, at that moment at least, are only astounded or amazed. Only the "**sick one**," the one who has nothing to lose and everything to gain, is the one who has a personal life-saving encounter with God through Jesus.

Which now brings us to the next theme found in this passage. Jesus' authority. Remember the congregation's response to Jesus? "**What's this? A new teaching--with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!**"

Question. What was the difference between Jesus' authority vis a vis the scribes? Why was Jesus a breath of fresh air into the stagnant moldy religion of the day? The obvious answer is that Jesus is the Holy One of God. So maybe the question should be, "**How is God's way different from our way?**" Here's one explanation. God's way is always liberating. God has the authority to release us from sin and sadness. And when you observe Jesus' inaction you see that he never controlled or forced people. He let them choose, he respected their free will. What's more he didn't come to dominate, but to love and serve. Jesus simply released the power of God within him, letting God's truth and grace flow freely.

On the other hand, the religious leaders, the scribes, the temple priests and the Pharisees cloaked themselves in the false authority of their high and lofty positions. Instead of being servant leaders who loved and nurtured their people, they became addicted to their institutional power. They became, in effect, heads of a dysfunctional

family and whenever someone became "**unclean**" because of leprosy, or failing to keep the Law of Moses, that person became "**the sick one**" who was scapegoated, separated from the community, because he didn't quite fit into their neat little system of religious respectability.

One of the signs of a congregation that is spiritually healthy is a prevailing atmosphere of freedom that is based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is no pecking order that is those at the top, those in leadership positions don't try to dominate the conversation, (It's my way or the highway.) There's no inner circle calling the shots, those in authority are not authoritarian.

Instead, in a healthy church, those called to leadership realize that their role model is Jesus Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve. If you've been ordained to be a pastor, an elder or a deacon, your's is not supposed to be a ministry of self-promotion imposing your will on the rest, but by submitting to the authority of Jesus, until his authority, his personality becomes second nature to you. You then yourself become more like Jesus, you become a Christ-like presence, you find yourself becoming an instrument of Christ's peace. Through you people hear about and experience the liberating authority of Jesus.

To lead with authority is to lead in harmony with the source of all authority. Do you remember Jesus' last words to his disciples just before he was taken up into heaven? "**All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.**" In other words, God gave his only son the ability to be that powerful, loving, graceful presence. But Jesus doesn't hoard it for himself. He freely shares it with anyone who wants it, especially those who've been scapegoated.

Would you like to have that same authority in your life? Then take it, then live it. Lead by example. Live like Jesus. Be a disciple who makes disciples. "**Go therefore and make disciples...baptizing them...and teaching them... And remember, I am always with you.**"

Chances are great you are here in worship this morning because you know you need Jesus. You know only Jesus can heal you and make you clean. You also know only Jesus can empower you with his authority if you are serious about being his disciple.

Be one of those Christian disciples, claiming the authority of Jesus, and now determined to pass that authority on to anyone who will accept it as we work together to make the Kingdom of God the only viable alternative to our broken, unclean world.

Let us pray!