

January 28, 2018

Be Gone

Mark 1:21-28

INTRO:

Matt Woodley tells this story:

A number of years ago, when I was playing in a friendly men's softball game, the umpire made a call that incensed our coach. My coach didn't agree with the ump's interpretation of a specific league rule. The game stopped, and a heated discussion ensued. Finally, the ump sighed as he pulled a rulebook from his back pocket and proceeded to read page 27, paragraph 3b, section 1.

"As you can clearly see," he concluded, "this rule means that my call must stand." Unconvinced, my coach yelled, "But you're not interpreting that rule correctly." To which the ump replied, "Uh, excuse me, I think I should know: I wrote the rulebook." After an awkward silence, my coach walked back to the bench, shaking his head and pointing to the ref as he told us, "Get ahold of that guy. He wrote the rulebook!"

Throughout his ministry, Jesus didn't just affirm and endorse the words of Scripture; he talked and acted like he had authored the Scriptures. He lived with the authority of the One who wrote the "rulebook."

ME:

I am not always sure the best way to think of the Bible is as a “**rule book**” though. There are plenty of rules and commandments in it, yes, but it is all about God loving us. God reaching out to us with grace and mercy and love so that we are motivated to reach out to others with this grace and mercy and love.

YOU:

Do you just see the Bible as a rule book? Is that what gives it authority for you? Bible means “**book**” and it is the Word of God only as we allow it to reveal God to us and through us. Jesus is the Word of God, the love of God come to earth. Let’s listen to him:

PRAY

GOD:

Mark 1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and 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.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They 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.” 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

WE:

Mark’s Gospel is not known for wordiness or a whole lot of narrative detail. They say that John’s is the English major’s Gospel. The sit-down-and-stay-awhile storytelling with vivid imagery and poetic phrasing. Mark’s is just the opposite.

Mark’s is the Twitter Gospel.

The story told in as few characters as possible, with little embellishment. The result is an ongoing sense of urgency:

Let’s go. We’ve got work to do. I’ll explain later.

Which is how Jesus engages the unclean spirit in this passage. Briefly, authoritatively, and with zero drama. “**Be gone with you,**” he says, as one who has the **authority** to command things like this. Which, of course, he does. *This is the main lesson of the story, and one of the key messages of Mark’s Gospel:*

Jesus holds power over all elements, human and otherwise, worldly and otherworldly.

He does not have time to mess around, over-explaining his every move. Follow him now and figure out the details later.

Even the spirits obey him . . .

The notion of “**possession**” is so foreign to our context that many are tempted to substitute the unclean spirit with a modern-day mental illness.

That is dangerous!

Even with the best of intentions, such interpretation can be full of all sorts of unintended implications for the hearer. A better approach would be for us to explore current understandings of authority.

What people or institutions influence our daily decisions, for better or worse?

Where do we get our news?

What sources do we trust, and why?

Whose opinions matter to us?

And what impact do all of these voices have on our faith life?

Entering into that crowded circle of influence is:

Jesus.

What does he have to say in the daily barrage of messages that we receive?

How might his words transform the other voices we have to process, and what “unclean spirits” might we need to exorcise in order to fully embody his spirit of love and mercy?

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum. Jesus went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and began to teach. Let’s think for a moment about Jesus as a teacher. There is a close connection in Mark’s Gospel between **preaching** and **teaching**. Whatever differentiates them, it is not their content. Though Mark contains more references to Jesus as teacher than any other Gospel, it contains far fewer of Jesus’ actual words, with only a few extended examples of his teaching. The title “**teacher**,” or “**rabbi**,” is the most common one used for Jesus in Mark. Even more, the major blocks of teaching found in Mark do not contain straightforward instruction, but rather are made up of parables.

We hear of Jesus teaching and the people’s astonishment at his teaching, but there is no direct account of what he said. Some think that in Mark, Jesus teaches NOT primarily by **word** but by **action**. Specifically in this passage, Mark linked **teaching** with the divine power of **exorcism**.

The people were amazed at his teaching ... he taught them as one who had authority. There is something undeveloped in this observation made by

Mark that he very slowly and very subtly unveiled throughout the remainder of the Gospel:

a bold contrast between Jesus and the scribes.

Scribes are like a modern secretary as they offered their record-keeping abilities for hire. But, scribes were often associated with political officials or other members of high society. The New Testament links the scribes with the chief priests and the Jewish religious establishment, and it even seems to suggest some authority in their teaching. The New Testament also shows scribes as a unified group. Their unity was probably due to their common opposition to Jesus, though.

We really have to remember that each of Jesus' most revealing teaching moments, such as the parables, the feeding narratives, and especially his predictions of his own death, totally escaped the grasp of the disciples. He was the teacher sent by God and anointed by his Spirit, yet humanity just did not understand his his teachings.

Let's think a little more about this context of synagogue worship. Synagogue worship in Jesus' day probably included prayers, blessings, readings from the Law and the Prophets, translations of the material into Aramaic, and finally an interpretation of the readings. This last element was not based on a scribe's personal interpretation of the text, but of a series

of interpretations of the passage known as the *Oral Tradition* or *Tradition of the Elders*. So, what the scribes taught was essentially a series of legal precedents surrounding the text from previous rabbis, basing their authority on **tradition** while holding back any personal insights. Jesus, on the other hand, consistently taught with what Mark called “**authority**.” His source of **authority** originated from the baptism of the Holy Spirit. While the scribes quoted other rabbis, Jesus’ **authority** was self-authenticating. The people were amazed. This specific occurrence of the word “**amaze**” does not mean it was a faith-creating event. Rather, the words “**amazed**” or “**astonished**” mean that the crowds or onlookers had been impacted by Jesus’ teaching or by their witness of the miracles. But it doesn’t mean that they came to faith or that they adopted Jesus’ worldview as their own.

The man who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out in verse 23. “**Unclean spirit**” is a common way for Mark to refer to a demonic possession. This was to be contrasted with the description given to Jesus in verse 24 by the unclean spirit:

“I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

This man was not a distraction from his teaching, but Jesus’ verbal teaching included the actions of bringing mercy and deliverance to the suffering. The words of the man sound more like a **confession** than a **cry**, for they contain both Jesus’ earthly designation—*Jesus of Nazareth*—and his divine origin—*Holy One of God*. In Mark, the residents of the heavenly realm

knew and trembled at the name of Jesus; it was humans that were **oblivious** to his majesty. The unclean spirit wanted information about Jesus' mission.

“Have you come to destroy us?”

Jesus' response was NOT the beginning of a conversation with the demons, but a desire silence them. It was to announce once again his mission to the listening crowds as he cast out the demons with a firm criticism. They say this act rhetorically answered the unclean spirit's question. Indeed the Holy One of God had come to destroy the works of the evil one.

We should not overlook this first command to silence in the Gospel of Mark. The same word was spoken to the wind and waves later in the Gospel. The unclean spirits in this and other passages knew Jesus to be the all-powerful Son of God. However, from Mark's perspective, that message is only **partially** right. Jesus was not to be proclaimed until he was understood to be the one who had come to suffer and die. The words of the demons are only partially right, and half a gospel message can be just as dangerous as none. So, this is the beginning of what scholars have called **the Messianic Secret** that runs throughout the first half of the Gospel of Mark. It refers to those times when Jesus commands the demons to silence, preventing people from receiving a distorted view of

Christ. Surprisingly, Jesus also ordered his disciples to remain silent until after his death and resurrection.

The news about Jesus spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. Jesus' command to secrecy did not stop the spread of his popularity throughout Galilee. So, the first miracle in the Gospel was the basis of Jesus' fame. He has **authority**, much more than the scribes, and he commands demons. The real question that is just beneath the surface will become the driving force in the rest of Mark: "**Who is Jesus?**" The rest of Mark unpacks the answer, and every word should be heard as a Jesus "**teaching moment**" for the sole purpose of discovering the nature and purpose of Jesus.

This first synagogue event should be seen as a synopsis of Jesus' plan in dealing with both the human and cosmic realms. Humans are whole persons, in need of a holistic salvation. The answer is never to be trivialized into a "**going to heaven**" answer. Yet people will flock to the spectacular and fixate upon the instant spiritual gratification. Jesus will never cease to offer miracles of mercy, but he will not allow himself to be defined solely by those events. It is full freedom and release from what holds men and women captive that Jesus will proclaim with his teaching and with his suffering and death. In the end, Jesus will not allow a partial gospel to be pro-

claimed. He will silence any and all people who speak only of the miracles without the cross.

THE SERMON IN SENTENCE:

Jesus has authority to do what needs to be done to bring holistic salvation to Creation.

YOU:

Does Jesus have authority in your life? we should not assume that because we are here in Church this'd morning that's he does. If he does not, then that is something we can all work on together. **How do you think you can work on it?**

CLOSE:

In his book *Up with Authority*, Victor Lee Austin uses the analogy of an orchestra to explain why we need human authority. Orchestras need conductors because the musicians don't have a single right answer to questions like, "What should we play at the concert?" or "What should we practice today?" or "How should we interpret this passage?" Each musician might have a perfectly reasonable opinion, but their opinions will inevitably be different and will almost always be incompatible with one another. And it's no good for each musician to do what is right in his or her own ears. It won't do for the brass section to insist on playing a one musical piece if the strings have chosen to play a completely different piece. If the orchestra is

to perform coherently, if the musicians want to perform music rather than just make noise, somebody has to have authority to decide.

By submitting to the authority of a conductor, individual musicians attain musical expression they could never realize individually or even as a collection of free-wheeling players. Authority is necessary for classical musicians to bring musical fulfillment to others. In the words of Victor Lee Austin, the conductor's authority yields "**a greater degree of human flourishing than we would have from the musicians separately or individually.**" What is true for orchestras is true for human life in general.

Let's pray to our Conductor together now...