

“Un-catch the Unclean Spirit”

Salado UMC—4 February 2018

4th Sunday after the Epiphany

Preaching Text: Mark 1:21-28—Year B

Salado, Texas 76571

**“To punish me for my contempt for authority,
fate made me an authority myself”** (Albert Einstein: 1879—1955).

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In his book, *Certain Trumpets: The Call of Leaders*, Garry Wills wrote:

Socrates is the archetype of all those who learn by teaching, who keep up the energy, curiosity, and intellectual freshness to ask the basic questions all over again, not merely as a pedagogical technique, but as a genuine way of advancing their own moral understanding. There are few such teachers, for all the talk of “Socratic method” in law schools and elsewhere. Almost every serious thinker, like Plato, retires into refined and esoteric research, speaking to and for elite knowers.

It would be inauthentic for such people to pretend they are still learning from beginners. In fact, it is rare that the truly great intellectual leader is found in a classroom. Voltaire in his salon, Samuel Johnson at tea, Paul traveling through Asia Minor—these are the sons of Socrates. Or St. Augustine preaching from his episcopal chair: “So great is the tie between those similarly disposed that when listeners are moved as we speak, we are reciprocally moved. We change places as it were, they speaking what they hear, we learning what we teach” (p. 170).

I cite Wills to remind us that the first thing Jesus does in Mark is teach. Hear the lesson:

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[a] commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee (Mark 1:21-28).

May we look at three distinct aspects of Jesus’ teaching and its effect. First of all, Jesus taught in the synagogue. Before Jesus did anything else, Jesus taught. I think this is not only interesting, but especially noteworthy in Jesus story the way Mark tells it. By analyst Hugh Anderson’s count (*The New Century Bible Commentary*, 1976, p. 89), Mark uses the verb for teach sixteen times in the Gospel, and on eleven occasions Mark describes Jesus as “teacher.”

Yet, Mark is not strictly interested in the content of Jesus' teaching. We readily see this when we recall Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (5-7) and Luke's Sermon on the Plain (6:20-49). In fact, a much of the substance that makes both Matthew and Luke significantly longer than Mark concerns the content of Jesus' teaching. Perhaps, for Mark, it is most important for us to know that first and foremost Jesus was simply a teacher. Jesus was not an ordinary teacher either. The people can scarcely believe their ears as they hear him teach. The text reads explicitly: "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (v. 22). The next part of the story will show us the difference between the teaching of Jesus and that of the scribes, whom Mark indirectly maligns.

Second of all, Mark tells us much more in this story than that Jesus was merely a teacher. Jesus enacted his teaching by a healing miracle/exorcism. As the amazed people listen to this remarkable teacher, a man with an unclean spirit stumbles into Mark's synagogue scene. Mark does not name this man, nor pay attention to the details of him other than to have his unclean spirit cry out. In confession the spirit speaks 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."

It is interesting that in Mark's Gospel the demons and evil spirits seem to know who Jesus is. The evil spirit makes the kind of identification which no human being, with one exception, will make in Mark's entire Gospel. There exists a bond of mutual recognition between the demonic spirits and the Spirit-filled Son of God (W. Kelber, p. 20). The point Mark makes is that the one who teaches with authority is also the one who casts out demons and heals—with authority. No wonder then that Jesus' fame spread. Mark helps readers link Jesus' words and deeds in distinct ways. Perhaps, this was as rare in Jesus' time as it is in ours: a person whose words and deeds are completely congruent/consistent.

Third and finally, in Jesus' time the ability to heal was a manifestation of God. Yet, it puzzles us. Throughout Mark's Gospel who Jesus was and the purposes for which God sent him remain mysterious. Today these same questions baffle us too. The early Christians spread word of Jesus about Galilee. But again, as we will pick up again to read in Mark, no one really quite knew who he was or why he had come.

God also asks us to spread Jesus' fame. Until now, even twenty or so centuries later, it perplexes us about who Jesus is—exactly. From our text today, Jesus teaches and achieves an exorcism of a demoniac with authority. Jesus' authority extends to every aspect of his life and, therefore, to ours. Our task is to establish and extend that authority by all the means at our disposal. More than any other task, ours is a teaching task. We introduce to the world to Jesus' authority. If we are able to do this, even in part, then we will have done our faithful part in spreading Jesus' fame—perhaps for the world's salvation. Gerald Bonner (*The Library of History and Doctrine*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1963) alludes to the teaching life of St.

Augustine:

Less than nine months after his [Augustine's] death, Pope Celestine admirably expressed the view of Western Christians in a solemn tribute to his memory. 'The life and merits of Augustine, that man of holy memory, always kept him in Our communion, nor was he ever assailed by so much as a

suspicion of evil. We remember him as a man of such great wisdom that he was always reckoned by Our predecessors among the greatest teachers.' This verdict would have been enthusiastically endorsed by Augustine's flock (p. 149).

Perhaps, as we receive the body and blood of Christ today, we too, can teach about the one who has taught us with authority. By the quality of our life together, perhaps, those in our community can see the authority of Christ for their lives and for our world. Amen.

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