

“Look at That!”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 1: 21-28

We live on a court with ten houses on it. About half-way down the court lives Tom and his wife. Tom is the president of our homeowners’ association, and has lived on the court as long as anyone. Debbie and I have nicknamed him “the godfather.” In other words, when Tom talks, you’d best pay attention.

Last week I was getting out of my car in the driveway, and I hear, “Hey Frank!” It was Tom. Without missing a beat, I turned right around and said, “Hey Tom!” I didn’t want him to feel slighted at all, else the next phrase out of his mouth might be, “I’m going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.” In fact, he did have an offer I wasn’t going to refuse: a roll-top desk he was giving away. I came over to his garage and we moved it over to my garage. When I came back to his house to get the drawers, I looked up and saw something which got my attention. “Look at that!” I said, pointing to a contraption hanging from the ceiling. Tom explained to me it was a device he got to wind extension cords up, keeping them in a neat, contained place, and it makes it easy to unroll them when in use. It was something I had never seen before, and now I want to find at least one for my own use!

“Look at that!” That’s a phrase we use a lot these days. I’ve heard it said recently when new changes are being made around town in preparation for the Super Bowl. We say it whenever the latest video flashes over the internet on You Tube or Facebook. We say it whenever a commercial comes on the television which catches our attention. “Look at that!” That phrase reflects fascination, excitement, and interest. It indicates that something is different than the norm, and we’re drawn to learn more about this different thing.

When we read this passage from Mark today, a great many things have preceded Jesus’ arrival in Capernaum. He has been baptized by John in the Jordan River, being claimed by God as “my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” He has spent forty days in the wilderness, withstanding temptation from the devil. He has walked along the Sea of Galilee, and called four fishermen to be his first disciples. After these many events, we read that “They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught” (1:21).

And it’s as if the next words out of the people’s mouths were: “Look at that!” “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority” (1:22). As one having authority – what does that mean? Why was this so different than the normal Sabbath teaching? Barbara Lundblud writes:

Why did people sense authority in Jesus' presence? How did they recognize his authority and what was so compelling about it? It was his teaching. "He taught as one who had authority." So sit back . . . put your bulletin into the pew rack. Then, we'll listen. What is this teaching that so astonished Jesus' hearers?

We don't know. Not a word of Jesus' teaching is remembered here in Capernaum. Whatever it was that so astonished people was not written down for us to hear. You may rightly protest that Jesus' teaching is remembered in other places – in some Bibles, everything Jesus said is printed in red. Yet, it is rather odd that in Mark's gospel, where Jesus is called "Teacher" over and over again – by disciples, by the crowd, by Pharisees and Herodians – very few of Jesus' teachings are remembered. In Mark, there is no Sermon on the Mount as in Matthew. Nor will you find many of Luke's parables. And we will never know what Jesus taught here in Capernaum – we only know how he taught: "as one who had authority, and not as the scribes."

In Mark's gospel Jesus himself is the content of the teaching. The authority is not in particular speeches, but in this particular life. Jesus lived as one who had authority, an authority radically different from that of tradition. Different from what had been expected. To understand this authority we must not only listen, we must also look.

We see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners; we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath day, silencing the scribes' objection not with an answer but a question: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath day to do good or to do harm, to save a life or to kill?" We see Jesus moved by the feisty faith of a Syrophenician woman who dared to argue with him for the healing of her daughter. We hear questions as a source of truth, and we hear Jesus admits the limits of his own knowledge. When Jesus spoke about the end of time, he said: "Of that day or of that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only God." At the end of his life, brought before the council of religious elders and the power of the state, Jesus' authority stands in silence. "And Pilate asked him again, 'Have you no answer to make? See how many charges they bring against you.' But Jesus made no further answer, so that Pilate wondered." Though pushed to get rid of Jesus, Pilate could not get Jesus out of his mind.

Even in silence, Jesus taught as one who had authority. It is this radically different kind of authority which compels us to re-examine what authority means for us, to look carefully at how authority functions, especially within the church. Jesus did not give us a systematic guidebook on authority. But, in Jesus' life, we have seen and heard clues of how his authority was made known in the world. The people in Capernaum were amazed, so that they questioned among themselves: "What is this? A new teaching!" When we hear and see this new teaching, we will be moved – if not toward clear answers – at least in certain clear directions (Barbara Lundblud, "A New Kind of Authority," February 2, 1997, http://day1.org/862-a_new_kind_of_authority).

“Look at that!” That phrase describes the people’s astonishment when Jesus commands a demonic spirit to leave a tortured man. That phrase describes the people’s amazement at this man who not only teaches God’s Word in new ways, but then lives out that teaching in extraordinary ways. That phrase describes the realization throughout the gospel narrative of witnesses to God’s only Son, making sacrifices on their behalf, all in the name of love. Even in death, the centurion’s declaration echoes this phrase: “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (15:39). “Look at that!”

People did not respond to Jesus because he only preached and taught exquisitely. People responded with conviction and devotion to Jesus because he lived out his preaching and teaching in extraordinary ways. His authority came from the life he led, not only by the words he spoke.

People do not respond to the church’s message only by what is preached or taught or debated. People respond to the church’s message when those words are congruent with the actions of those speaking them. People are convicted to follow God when they witness acts of love, caring, and service flowing out of the message being spoken day in, day out. Authority does not come from the words which we speak. Authority comes from the lives which we lead, mirroring the radical grace we have been shown in Jesus Christ our Lord.

A pastor of an affluent church in South Carolina shares the story about a woman named Barbara in their church. She was not affluent like many others, and she started making regular appearances in the offices. She and her son lost their home to foreclosure, and then had to move to government-assisted housing, where crime was rampant. Then her pleas began: money for food, money for gas, money for her son to have a Christmas. Barbara’s arrival in the office became part of their weekly routine, and they would give her Band-Aids of just enough of what she asked for.

Finally, this pastor writes, *a fellow staff member said: “Let’s stop messing around and really help her. It’s going to take a lot of money, and you know as well as I do who is going to say we’re crazy. But we can live through that.” Barbara enrolled in nursing school, living in a furnished apartment donated for the time it took her to complete her education, driving a car provided by another parishioner, her tuition and day-to-day expenses taken care of.*

I don’t have the faintest idea where Barbara and her son, Jeffrey, are these days. I do, however, remember how she said she would tell the story called “God Helps,” the chapters and chapters of mercy that came by way of her conviction that God would see her desperate need, would care about her, would cause her life to be re-ordered, and in fact, had brought her through the door into the place where God had chosen for that to be done.

A straight-A student and only a step away from receiving her cap, Barbara announced, “I want to come speak to the vestry at its next meeting.” She did come and stood there before the church’s leaders – the rector and the 12 rich business people and the civic movers and shakers. She stood erect in

her white uniform, a stethoscope around her neck and told her story of the eking away of her life and of the miracle of her new life. And most especially of its purpose. These are the words that every person in that room believed then as we wept together, and remembers now - most especially what she said last: "Thank you for helping me when I could not help myself. Because of you, I am going to be able to help others. I want you to know this. Every single time I touch a person for healing, this parish will touch that person with me. You will be right there" (Mary Moore Roberson, "I Will With God's Help," February 5, 2006, <http://day1.org/976-i-will-with-gods-help>).

Look at that! Look at them! Look at what God is doing! Friends, go and do likewise. Amen.