

Focus: Jesus exercises his authority to save us.

One of the wonderful things about being a pastor is, if you keep your ears open, you can get all kinds of wisdom. I remember one person in my first call in southern Indiana whose words have had a profound effect on my ministry and on my life. She used to tell me, “People will forget what you say, but they’ll never forget how you made them feel.” While, ironically, I *do* remember her words, I remember even more how she made me feel: trusted, valued, encouraged. It is her compassionate care that has stuck with me even after leaving that church, allowing me to hear and *know* the wisdom of her words.

Words seem to be the focus of our stories today. Shortly before Moses’s death in Deuteronomy, God promised that someday he would raise up another prophet “like Moses (Dt 18:15),” one whom “the LORD knew face-to-face (Dt 34:10)” and who would share these words of divine teaching and wisdom with the people of Israel. The years, decades, centuries passed, as prophets came and went: some great, others not so much, scribes filled their places: some faithful, others not as much, and all along the people waited for the LORD to fulfill this promise of a mighty prophet.

And finally, in the person and teaching of Jesus Christ, God fulfills the promise. The word that is used twice today to describe Jesus’s teaching is *authority*. “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one with authority, and not as their scribes”—and “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”

But you know what I want to know?

What he actually teaches!

Look over the passage again. For however much the people “were astounded,” however much “they were amazed,” *Mark never tells us what Jesus’s teaching actually was*. In fact, this really becomes a theme of Mark’s Gospel. In Matthew, we have Jesus’s “Sermon on the Mount,” in Luke, beautiful parables, and if you open the Gospel of John, Jesus just gives one long speech after another. But in the Gospel of Mark, we hear very little about what Jesus actually *taught*.

There often is a temptation to think that what made Jesus special was his *teachings*. So Jesus takes his place alongside Buddha, and Gandhi, and whoever else, but if Jesus’s teachings are what make him great, that’s not what Mark tells us. No, instead, Jesus’s *authority* seems to come from somewhere else.

What could that be? Could it be his family? Not likely. The son of a carpenter. Could his authority come from his eloquence? Perhaps, but if so, again, where are his words? Could it come from his social status? Certainly he had to have some sort of level of respect to be allowed to preach and teach, but he himself was not a priest or a scribe.

Jesus’s authority comes from none of those things. The word Mark uses for *authority* in Greek is ἐξουσία, and unlike some of the bad connotations our word *authority* has, it’s entirely positive. It means “what comes out of your being.” Authority is not a schtick of being a Tough Guy® or appearing to be in control. No, authority is what comes out of who you are.

And in this passage, we see exactly what Jesus's authority is. His authority is his love. And to be more specific, it's how he uses that love: *to save others*.

Because right in the middle of his sermon, Jesus has something happen that I've not yet had to deal with as a pastor: a man starts convulsing and screaming right in front of him. (Remind me of this if I ever get flustered when Titus coos while I'm trying to preach.) This poor man is being driven literally outside of himself by a demon. In contrast to Jesus, this is a man who has no authority, who cannot even control his own actions or speech.

And Jesus confronts the demon. He commands him. And the demon, amazingly, recognizes who Jesus is. And not only that, what he has come to do. The demon in one line shows remarkable insight that will take the apostles three years to piece together! The demon says, "What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? [Yes, he has! Remember last week: the kingdom of God vs. the kingdom of the devil.] I know who you are, the holy one of God"—a confession of faith Peter the Rock won't make for seven more chapters. And the demon...comes out! *Voila!*

But you know what stands out to me? "Be silent, and come out of him." Come out *of him*. In this chaotic moment when Jesus is literally being yelled at by the forces of hell, he sees the humanity of this poor man suffering in front of him. This unnamed man who is not himself in any way, shape, or form, who has nothing to offer Jesus in return, and honestly, is doing nothing but *distracting* from Jesus's *teaching*, is *still* a human being: a human being who is the object of Jesus's love, compassion, salvation.

That's what authority looks like.

If people went home that Sabbath day debating the finer points of Jesus's sermon, we don't hear about it. But we do have their reaction recorded after he saved this one man. We imagine that many of them came back to synagogue the next week to hear him again, perhaps they were later in the pews for the "Sermon on the Mount" or the feeding of the 5000. But in this act of saving love toward one man, Jesus's message as being the Savior of the world was vividly, memorably, *authoritatively* clear.

Every one of us is that man. Every one of us stands before God in need of mercy that can't come from ourselves, but must come from out of his heart and his great love. And on the cross and in the waters of baptism, Christ has shown his great love for each and every one of us as the Word of God who speaks louder than human words.

So what is our authority as Christ's church? If we are to "fish for people," to bring people to Jesus, as we discussed last week, what does that look like? Let there be no doubt: We face the same forces of evil at work in the world now that were active at the synagogue in Capernaum back then.

Pope Francis once described the church as a field hospital. His point? You tend to people's hurt and injuries, and only then do you teach them. I suspect that when this current crisis is finally over, people are not going to remember what I said week-to-week or what we said week-to-week, but they will remember how we made them feel. Did we treat their lives as valued and

precious, as people Christ died for (1 Cor 8:11)? Was our message one of spoken words or the Word in action? How will we exercise the authority given to us for the sake of the world Christ loves? **Amen.**