

With Authority

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came,
he entered the synagogue and taught.

They were astounded at his teaching,
for he taught them as one having authority,
and not as the scribes.

Just then, there was in their synagogue,
a man with an unclean spirit, 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.”

But Jesus rebuked him, saying,
“Be silent, and come out of him!”

And the unclean spirit,
convulsing him and crying with a loud voice,
came out of him.

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.”

At once his fame began to spread
throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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I.

We discover, or create, that for which we seek. In a nutshell, this is the message of today's sermon. Of course (as always) there is more to the story but, essentially, this is the gist of it.

After a rather intense but productive week, last Thursday afternoon Linda and I dropped off 6 kazoos at Partridge Knoll; entrusting them to the care of my good friend, Bob Fraser, who celebrated his 92nd birthday this past Friday. Then, we picked up a \$59k check from the proceeds from the sale of the Selleck land from the law office of Roger Linden, an ever admirable guy, on a number of levels. Finally, we packed up the truck and headed out to the lake for the weekend.

Driving through the farms, fields, and forests of Hermon NY, we both let out deeps sighs and said something to effect of, this is the *dreariest* day in the history of the world; a sheet of frozen rain on everything, clammily cold, uncomfortably wet, pervasively gray and, now, all the slush. That said, Friday was *every* bit as dreary.

II.

There is a word for this; it is called, "January!" If there was ever a point in the year to remind ourselves of what Retreat Coach Linda often says, January is that time: you cannot always choose your circumstances, but you *can* choose how you respond and what you think. For example, one such modest but significant response to January, is today's celebration of National Kazoo Day! I mean, how much fun is that!?! Only at the Church on the Park. One thing is for sure, it certainly beats (I'm not kidding you about this, look it up) National Nipple Piercing Day, which was this past Friday. No, not *even* at the Church on the Park. Though I'm sure we'd have one or two takers.

In many ways, however, the ways in which we choose to *respond* to circumstances is far easier than what we *think* about such circumstances. I know in my own life, I often act so as to move quickly past circumstances but, all the while, my mind keeps gnawing away as it remains stubbornly stuck in place.

III.

While July is a poor time to do so (what would be the point) January is the ideal time to think about how we think about our circumstances; specifically, those circumstances that challenge us, daunt us, and drive to the point of despair. One of the most important first steps in changing how we think, is to stop thinking in the same old ways, and approach one's circumstances from a fresh perspective; however, odd, tangential or weird it might be.

Hence, today's sermon text from Mark 1:21-28 which raises the issue of authority; specifically, the authority of Jesus. Here we find Jesus in the very midst of a local synagogue astounding those gathered there by both his teaching and his miracle making, as he instructs on the scripture and casts out an "unclean spirit" which has taken up residence in one particular individual.

IV.

The notion of "authority" is one of those things we really do not think about very much because we assume to already understand it. We shall see.

When we speak of the notion of authority we do so, primarily, in one of two ways; either as *expertise*, or the *right to rule*. To have authority in matters of belief (to be "*an* authority") is to have *theoretical* authority, while to have authority over action (to be "*in* authority") is to have *practical* authority.

Today's sermon text is an excellent example of each of these forms of authority. First, Jesus demonstrates a theoretical authority by his expertise in Hebrew scripture. Those who heard him that day were astounded by this because he taught as one having authority; but in a way that was unlike the authority of the scribes. Then, Jesus demonstrates a practical authority in his ability to cast out the unclean spirit; which, by the way, clearly recognized such an authority emanating from Jesus.

V.

Having established a basic understanding of the two different kinds of authority, let us dig a little deeper to discover what undergirds each form; that which serves as the basis for authority. Theoretical authority arises from knowledge and instruction. Practical authority arises from power and permission.

Being something of a “scribe” myself, I possess a certain kind of authority about scripture based on the education and training which I received in seminary, as well as 30 years of applying that information while serving in parish ministry. This, I would argue, is on a par with the kind of knowledge and instruction the scribes in today’s text must have achieved so as to find themselves sitting in the synagogue that day. Clearly, though, the kind of authority with which Jesus taught that same day was either somehow *different* and/or also somehow *more* than the authority of the scribes; and not just by degree, but in the order of magnitude of insight, experience and application.

VI.

What such an order of magnitude they may be, we can only guess; and we will. Before we do, however, we garner from the text that the greater theoretical authority with which Jesus taught was both obvious and indisputable to those who witnessed it. Moreover, the unclean spirit which was subsequently cast out of the man it had been inhabiting clearly recognized the practical authority of Jesus, calling him “the Holy One of God. In each of these instances the two forms of authority were both indisputable and unambiguous; no shades of gray here, no matter of perspective, no instance of opinion.

Having established all of this, we now arrive at the heart of the matter: what was the nature of Jesus’ authority; both his theoretical authority in teaching and interpreting the scriptures, and his practical authority in casting out the unclean spirit? Said more simply, what powered Jesus’ authority?

VII.

It is at this point that we will go zooming past the exit ramp that most preachers and parishioners will be taking regarding today's lectionary passage from Mark; everyone wave as we go by! While certainly not in anyway a wrong turn, I envision today's Sunday drive taking us little more far afield. As we veer over to the passing lane to avoid the congestion and put some distance between us and them, let me explain the lemming-like rush to get off this particular theological highway.

Two weeks from today we will celebrate Transfiguration Sunday and the onset of the Lenten Season: the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the march to the cross and the jubilation of Easter morning. Today's scripture passage is meant to establish that the person who will be crucified, dead and buried and, on the third day, be raised from the dead is not just some prophet, or teacher, or a miracle maker but the Holy One of God; as attested to by the unclean spirit. If not, the whole atonement for the sins of the world thing will not wash.

VIII.

While today's scripture reading might rightly serve to establish such a conviction in the faithful, it really does not get at the *nature* of Jesus' authority; merely that he is in possession of said authority, as shown by his teaching and miracle making. This gets us from point A to point B. The more interesting question, however, is how to get us to point C; what makes Jesus' authority *authoritative*, what is the *nature* of that authority? Hence, our extended road-trip this morning.

While we should readily accept that Jesus *has* authority by virtue of being the Holy One of God, I would like to suggest that the deeper value of today's sermon text is in pointing us toward the *nature* of that authority. Which, in a word, is *hope*. Possessing more than just a scribe-like understanding of Hebrew scripture, Jesus' authority is derived from interpreting scripture through the lens of hope and, then, in bringing such a hope to real-world fruition in releasing the man from the unclean spirit.

IX.

This morning I will confess that this past year has found several streams in my life all converging at one place. One of these streams is professional: why to do I keep writing hope-filled sermons? There are certainly other things at work in the world about which one could preach, for or against, and with *considerably* less effort. Have I become stuck in a rut, or have I finally arrived at the intended destination?

Another of these streams has to do with certain personal relationships and endeavors at which I have worked hard all my life out of loyalty and deep fondness. Of late, though, I have allowed myself a reallocation of finite resources toward only those people and things which will, and are able, to help bolster and renew in me a sense of hope about the world. Have I become lazy and selfish, or have I simply come to a new honesty about the weight I can bear.

A final stream has to do with the realization that as I enter the third act of my life I can no longer ignore that this road will not go on forever; what I *will need* is looming so much larger than what I thought I had *once wanted*. Have I given up, or finally found hope's proper place?

X.

While there are many forms and manifestations of authority which hold sway over our lives, from legal and political to economic and religious, more and more the only authority I find myself utterly beholden to is the authority of hope. I am simply no longer very interested in any form of expertise but, rather, in what one does *with* that expertise so as to bring hope to the world. While I might still need to bend the knee to those who hold *power over* me, I have saved inclining my heart to those who hold out *hope to* me.

XI.

While we cannot always choose the circumstances of our lives, we *can* choose how we respond to, and what we think about, those circumstance. If we have been given the grace to believe that we do, indeed, *have* such a choice, let us choose to respond with hope, and to think hopefully; that hope might become *the* authority in our life together, both in theory and in practice.

While it is always the case that hope might be visited upon us through chance, fate or miracle, hope is *far* more likely to find us when we seek it out. Moreover, so great is our hope that not only do we believe that we might find hope, but that hope might find us and, so doing, we might create a hope so great it will bear the very weight of the world.

XII.

For the past 25 years I have witnessed this congregation seeking to act in a myriad of hopeful ways; and, in so doing, all of you have created hope in a world where it is in great demand but short supply. Today, I would challenge us to not just *act* with hope, but to *think* with the authority of hope that Jesus brought to the synagogue that day so long ago, and the authority of hope that Christ brings to our church this morning; even amid the dreariness of January; perhaps, even especially so.

We discover, or create, that for which we seek in every month of the year and moment of our life. Of course (as always) there is more to the story but, essentially, that is the gist of it. Amen.