

Divine Authority — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Mark 1:21-28

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 01-31-2021

The past two Sundays we have looked at Jesus' call to some of his disciples and what it means to hear and respond to God's call to follow Jesus.

Today, we are going to travel with Jesus and some of his disciples to the Synagogue in Capernaum and witness Jesus' divine authority and what that means for us, today.

Here is our Second Scripture Reading for today from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 1, verses 21-28:

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.ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

As you listened to the Scripture for today, what would you think is the focus of this passage? Would you say it is the miraculous healing of the man possessed by demons? Or the conversation that Jesus had with those demons? What about the people's reaction to Jesus – their amazement?

Would you be surprised if I told you that the focus is really Jesus' teaching? I mean, there is no account of Jesus' actual teaching in this story. So that couldn't be it, could it?

Let's look at the structure of the passage.ⁱⁱ

- a. Jesus comes into the synagogue (21)
 - b. Jesus teaches with authority and this is acknowledged with amazement by those present (22)
 - c. A man with an unclean spirit cries out (23-24)
 - d. Jesus heals the demoniac (25)
 - c'. The unclean spirit cries out and leaves the man (26)
 - b'. People acknowledge Jesus' authority with amazement (27-28)
 - a'. Jesus leaves the synagogue (29)

According to Professor Osvaldo D. Vena, the “[t]wo mentions of Jesus’ authority seem to frame the exorcism (verses 22, 27).”ⁱⁱⁱ

If you look closely at verses 22 and 27 you will see that the authority of Jesus to which the people are amazed is his ***teaching!***

²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

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.”

The casting out of the demon is miraculous. Certainly not an everyday occurrence in the synagogue. It would seem to be logical that THIS is what demonstrates Jesus’ divine authority.

And yet – the people’s focus is on Jesus’ teaching! *That* is how they knew he had authority – his words. He spoke them as one having authority, not as the scribes spoke.

You may wonder who the scribes were.

Again, borrowing from Professor Vena,

The main activity of scribes was teaching. It consisted of an exposition of the Law or the Prophets... Jesus is showing more authority than them. As Mark

describes it, he is not presenting a new teaching but is giving an interpretation that proved to be more relevant.^{iv}

The scribes spent their lives studying and interpreting the Old Testament Law and the Prophets. They were committed to understanding the word of God. People came to the synagogue often to hear them as they worshipped God.

On this day, Jesus came to the synagogue and began to teach. His teaching was unlike that of the scribes. Jesus had *and embodied* divine authority. This teaching with authority amazed the people in the synagogue. His healing of the man possessed by demon was an **extension** of his teaching. That teaching continued to amaze those who had gathered in the synagogue.

Look at verse 27 again,

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.”

Of all the things that happen in this story, does it not also surprise you that there was a man with an “unclean spirit” – a demon – in the synagogue that day?

What is this man doing in the synagogue? Why would someone with an unclean spirit go to church?

There is no indication in Mark's Gospel whether the people in the synagogue knew the man in question. There is no indication that the people knew the man had an unclean spirit before the demon began to speak to Jesus.

Of all the people gathered that day, only this man's demon recognized who Jesus was.

“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.”

The people were amazed at Jesus' teaching with authority, but only the demon knew who Jesus really was.

What do **we** learn from this story? What are we supposed to **do** with this story?

We could say, well, we already know who Jesus is. We already know that he possesses divine authority and the power to heal. We already know that Jesus' teachings are powerful and important.

Those are all true ... but is there more?

In the synagogue that day, people gathered as was their custom. They heard a message from Jesus that was interrupted by the cries of a distressed man. A man who needed healing.

Dr. Mike Graves, in his article on this passage suggests,

We preachers and churchgoers alike are capable of discussing this story ad nauseum, never giving thought to the man's condition. Is it possible we do the same thing on Sundays? And what about on Mondays?^v

Take a moment to think about this.

How many people “come” to church – whether in person or now on Zoom and Facebook – who are in fact this distressed man? Do we notice him or her? Do we recognize that they are in pain? If we do, do we know the cause of their pain? Or do we come and go without giving much thought of the other person?

What if WE are the distressed man or woman? Do we come to church hoping to encounter Jesus and be healed? Do we come hoping *someone* will notice us? What happens if no one notices?

These are hard questions.

It would be easier to just discuss whether we think demons are real or what Jesus possibly talked about as he taught.

Jesus asks the hard questions of us, however.

Professor Gary Charles sums up the hard questions that Jesus poses for us in this story,

As the characters in this story maintain a safe distance from Jesus, speculating among themselves about this new powerful teacher, readers of Mark [us, listening here today] are invited to follow Jesus into a whole new world... into Mark's world of Jesus walking around possessed by the power of the Spirit of God.... Careful readers of Mark's Gospel are put on notice from chapter 1 that the boundary-breaking, demon-dashing, law-transcending Son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus, and he expects of his followers far more than "amazement."^{vi}

The people in the synagogue knew they were hearing a new teaching with authority – they were *amazed*.

The man possessed by an unclean spirit was ***transformed***.

Jesus expects far more of his followers than amazement, Jesus expects and calls us to transformation!

Jesus - the boundary-breaking, demon-dashing, law-transcending Son of God has arrived in the person of Jesus.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are both to be transformed ***by Jesus*** and to be agents of transformation ***for Jesus***.

Please pray with me.

Dear God, rescue us from the forces of evil and destruction that pervade our lives and use us as instruments of your blessing, healing, and peace.

In Jesus' name, Amen.^{vii}

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-5>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-5>.

^{iv} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fourth-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-mark-121-28-5>.

^v Feasting on the Word. Mike Graves. Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. P. 313.

^{vi} Feasting on the Word. Gary W. Charles. Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. P. 313.

^{vii} <https://www.davidlose.net/2012/04/mark-1-21-28-2/>.