

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 28, 2024 (4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B)
Mark 1:21-28
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Did your mother ever say any of the following to you?

"Were you born in a barn? Stop ACTING like you were!"

"Don't talk with food in your mouth!"

"Pick that up. I'm not your maid."

"If your friends jumped off a CLIFF, would YOU jump too?"

Maybe you've heard this one: "Just wait till YOU have kids of your OWN!"

And of course, I'm sure you've heard, if not SAID, the all-time classic: "Because I'm your MOTHER, THAT'S WHY!"

These expressions have been passed down from generation to generation. They're expressions of AUTHORITY – the authority of a parent over a child.

Not ALL parents HAVE it though. We've all heard parents say things like "I really mean it this time," and see IMMEDIATELY that their words mean NOTHING.

On the other hand, you sometimes see someone say simply and quietly, "Come here, children," and a herd of kids tumbles into the room, waiting for what's to be said next.

Authority and power aren't easy to DEFINE, but it IS easy to RECOGNIZE when we SEE it.

In our gospel today, we heard, "They were astounded at his teaching, for Jesus taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Now THAT'S STRIKING, because the scribes were usually seen as THE authority on scripture. They read and copied the scriptures EVERY DAY. They could quote them from MEMORY. And they knew all the rabbinical TEACHINGS on the scriptures and could quote THOSE as well.

But the people hear JESUS, and they recognize that he speaks with an AUTHORITY that's DIFFERENT than the scribes. WHAT WAS it that was DIFFERENT?

A young second lieutenant at Fort Bragg discovered that he had no change when he was about to buy a pop from a vending machine. He flagged down a passing private and asked him, "Do you have change for a dollar?" The private said cheerfully, "I think so, let me take a look." The lieutenant DREW himself up STIFFLY and said, "Soldier, that is NO way to address an OFFICER. We'll start all over again. Do you have change for a dollar?" The private SNAPPED to attention, and saluted, and said, "No, sir!"

You see, there's a DIFFERENCE between speaking AUTHORITATIVELY and speaking WITH AUTHORITY. The scribes spoke AUTHORITATIVELY, drawing on the authority of OTHERS, quoting the wisdom of OTHERS, PILING up the quotes, teaching what they had BEEN TAUGHT. As Paul writes, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who CLAIMS to know something does NOT yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who LOVES God is KNOWN BY God." The scribes spoke AT the people, OVER them; Jesus spoke TO them, with love.

We have MODERN DAY scribes that try to BULLY us into thinking the way THEY do. They love to quote scripture, citing chapter and verse. They pile one Scripture upon another and quote ONE interpretation AFTER another to PROVE their logical positions, tracing a scarlet thread through the Bible, giving INSURMOUNTABLE PROOF that THEIR interpretation is, in FACT, the ONLY ACCEPTABLE one.

The interesting thing to me about THIS PASSAGE from Mark is that he makes it CLEAR that that was NOT JESUS' method! His authority was "not like that of the Scribes." I suspect that, like TODAY, their MENTAL GYMNASTICS didn't MEAN much to the COMMON person, and that's why the crowd noticed IMMEDIATELY that JESUS DIDN'T do that.

Think for a moment about this WORD, "authority." What OTHER word does it START with? "Author." Jesus speaks with authority because HE'S the AUTHOR. He knows the SCRIPTURES because he was the AUTHOR, the one who GAVE the words to the biblical writers in the FIRST place. He knew the WORDS, because they were HIS words. He didn't just SPEAK them; he EMBODIED them.

I read a little anecdote involving Pope John XXIII. One day the pontiff was having an audience with a group of people, ONE of whom was the mother of several children. At one point, the pope said to this woman, "Would you please tell me the NAMES of your children. I realize that ANYONE in this room could tell me their names, but something very SPECIAL happens when a MOTHER speaks the names of her OWN children."

What Jesus taught wasn't something he had LEARNED, but something he KNEW WITH ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY. He knew the TRUTH of what he spoke, from EXPERIENCE, and it was FROM that experience, from his own HEART, that he SPOKE.

But make no mistake, the authority of LOVE is NO LESS powerful. "Just then," we read, "there was...a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with US, Jesus of Nazareth?'" You see, authority DOESN'T GO UNCHALLENGED.

But, as I said with the children, it's striking how EASILY Jesus DEALS with the challenge. Again and again, the gospels show us that Christ has authority over ALL things, even the DEMONIC. He said, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And it's done, (snap) just like that.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?" Every person who has ever walked through that door has asked that question. Every ONE of us, who has ever STRUGGLED with something in our lives, has WONDERED, "What does Jesus have to do with ME? What does ANY of this have to do with MY life?" At one time or another, we've ALL wondered – "Is Jesus REALLY my SAVIOR? Does he care about me when I'm IN a big mess? When I'M a mess? Can I TRUST his promises?"

We don't talk much about demon possession anymore, but we DO have OUR DEMONS. Incredible numbers of people are possessed by drugs, or alcohol, or gambling, or sex, or pornography, and the list goes on and on.

I knew a man who was the smartest person I knew. He was a classmate of mine in seminary, and he was a theological dynamo. But not long after receiving his first call, ADDICTION struck. It was just the first of many. Even with repeated treatment, one after another after another addiction took over his life. Eventually he ended up in JAIL, which meant that, even after serving his time, he could NEVER be a PASTOR again, which was okay with him, because he'd lost his FAITH.

Addiction was HIS demon, but it's not the ONLY one we know. Some of us battle EVERY day with the demon of depression. Some of us battle the demon of anger, or resentment, or jealousy, or fear, or anxiety. Some of us carry a MEMORY so painful that it can paralyze us. EVERY ONE of us has SOME PERSONAL DEMON.

In God's Word, in THESE STORIES, God wants us to know that Jesus IS the SAVIOR – OUR Savior, that he'll be WITH us when we face the WORST demons of our lives. The people AROUND Jesus may not have realized who he was, but the unclean SPIRITS sure did. They SHOUT out his identity: "You are the Holy One of God!" And they were TERRIFIED of him, because they knew that their TIME was UP. They were FINISHED.

We may have our MOMENTS of DOUBT, but we can TRUST that Jesus will BE there when we need him. We won't FACE our demons ALONE. Jesus can FREE us from WHATEVER it is ties us into knots. He's the HOLY One of GOD!

In HIM, there is HOPE, because the LOVE of Jesus is ALWAYS STRONGER. And what does he have to do with YOU? He has EVERYTHING to do with you. His authority isn't ABOUT abstract

ideas; it's about the VERY REAL PAIN you feel. His word isn't for someone else; it's for YOU. His humiliation on the cross and his death...was for YOU. His body and blood...are for you. The community of Christ, the BODY of Christ...is for YOU.

What-EVER demon YOU are battling right now, whatever it is that's FRIGHTENING you, whatever it is that making you DOUBT yourself, it doesn't have any REAL POWER over you. Because there is one who is GREATER, and his name is JESUS. He came to SAVE you, and Jesus is STRONGER than ANYTHING that would hold you down. Jesus is LORD, and that has EVERYTHING to do with you.

What is this? A new teaching? No, a VERY OLD one. THIS is what AUTHORITY LOOKS like! Hear the WORD from the Holy One of God, and MARVEL at HIS authority. Welcome it and LEARN from it, but that's NOT ALL – you can ALSO EXPECT that it will CHANGE you. Jesus ALWAYS DOES. Because the authority of JESUS is his LOVE. Amen.