

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
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January 17, 2021 (4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year B, delivered on 2nd Sunday after Epiphany)
Mark 1:21-28
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Here in Aitkin, our children have recently started back to school in-person. So let's consider, for a moment, a CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE. It's only ONE experience, just one classroom, but almost everyone who has spent any time at ALL in a school has had at least one experience LIKE it.

The place was a high school English class. The subject was modern drama, and the exercise was a class reading of the script of Frank Gilroy's "The Subject Was Roses." The reading moved toward the final scene, one in which a young man named Timmy is leaving home and attempting to say farewell to John, his stubborn and unfeeling father.

The readers were DUTIFUL and LIFELESS. Students in the class glanced at their watches, WAITING for the bell. A boy and girl in the back of the room exchanged notes. Another boy, bored, looked out the window.

Timmy's lines call for him to say to his father that he had a dream the night before, a dream he has dreamed many times. In the dream he's told that his father is dead, and, when he hears this news, he runs into the street crying. Someone stops him and asks WHY he is crying, and he says that he's crying because his father is dead, and his father NEVER said that he loved him.

The boy READING Timmy's part faltered on these lines, his voice taking on a strange timbre. The boy lifted his eyes from the script, and looked directly at the teacher, and whispered, "MY father has never said that either"

And now, SUDDENLY, the class was DIFFERENT, ATTENTIVE. An ELECTRIC SILENCE filled the room. All eyes were NOW on the TEACHER, who motioned for the reading to continue.

The boy looked again at the page and hoarsely read the next line: "It's true you never said you love me. But it's also true that I've never said those words to you."

The boy reading John, his father's, lines said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Timmy – "I say them now ... I love you, Pop ... I love you."

The teacher was now standing BY the boy, his hand resting gently on the boy's shoulder. As the teacher held the boy close to him, first one member of the class, then another, spoke quietly and thoughtfully of the DIFFICULTY and of the HEALING power of loving another, EVEN when that love can't be RETURNED. When the students left the class THAT day, they weren't bored or merely informed, but CHANGED.

"What is this? A new teaching?" No, a VERY OLD one.

In our gospel 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, 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 one acceptable.

We have modern day scribes among our POLITICAL leaders too, but don't get me STARTED on that.

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 they noticed IMMEDIATELY that JESUS DIDN'T do that.

His authority did not come from quoting the Bible; he appealed to some OTHER source of authority. 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 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.

You see, God's Word, JESUS' words, have authority not only because they TELL us something, but because they DO something to us. Words like:

I love you.

I forgive you.

I need you.

Come WITH me.

When we hear THOSE words, they DO something to us; they CHANGE us.

Jesus' words DID what they said, CREATED what they spoke of. When he told someone they were healed, they rose from their bed and walked. When he said that someone was forgiven, they not only LEARNED ABOUT forgiveness, but actually EXPERIENCED forgiveness, as God cast aside their sin and freed them from whatever bondage gripped them.

It's no coincidence that these are the same words we speak in the church:

God loves you and so do we.

You are forgiven.

We need you.

Come and see.

These aren't just words; these are ACTS of great authority and power.

"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 the real deal? Is he 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?"

In God's Word, in THESE stories, God wants us to know that Jesus IS the real deal, 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!"

So we may have our moments of DOUBT, but we can TRUST that Jesus will BE there when we need him. We won't face the demons alone, and Jesus can FREE us from whatever ties us into knots. He's the REAL deal!

In Jesus, 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'RE 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, LEARN from it, but that's not all. Expect ALSO that it will CHANGE you. It ALWAYS DOES. Because the authority of JESUS is love. Amen.