

“A New Teaching”
Mark 1:21-28

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Authority. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language speaks of authority as “a power or right to direct the actions or thoughts of others. Authority is a power or right, usually because of rank or office, to issue commands and to punish for violations.”

Speaking from a Social Science perspective, the sociologist and philosopher Max Weber distinguishes three types of authority—charismatic, traditional and legal-rational—each of which corresponds to a brand of leadership that is operative in contemporary society.

First, charismatic authority points to an individual who possesses certain traits that make a leader extraordinary. This type of leader is not only capable of but actually possesses the superior power of charisma to rally diverse and conflict-prone people behind him. His power comes from the massive trust and almost unbreakable faith people put in him.

Second, traditional authority indicates the presence of a dominant personality. This leader is someone who depends on established tradition or order. While this leader is also a dominant personality, the prevailing order in society gives him the mandate to rule. This type of leadership, however, is reflective of everyday routine and conduct.

Third, legal-rational authority is one that is grounded in clearly defined laws. The obedience of people is not based on the capacity of any leader but on the legitimacy and competence that procedures and laws bestow upon persons in authority.

As you consider our Gospel reading for today, think about which of these types of authority might apply to Jesus.

Mark indicates that the teaching of Jesus in the synagogue results in the amazement of those witnesses in the synagogue on that Sabbath day. *"They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."*

Speaking for pastors, I must admit that we all secretly hope for a similar outcome on Sunday mornings. We want you to be astounded by our preaching and teaching. I suppose that through our ordination, and the affirmations we have received from our denominations and our congregations, we have been granted some authority to preach and teach the word, but how could we ever hope to preach and teach with the authority of Jesus? Maybe that is where the power comes in. Of course, we can imitate Jesus, we can act like Jesus—but then, that's all it is—acting—a performance. Many of you know that I have a background in theater. I can act like one with authority—but that doesn't mean I have authority. I can act like one with power—but that doesn't mean I have power.

But, I think that is just as well. It keeps me humble to realize that any authority or power I have comes to me from God, and is only the result of God working through me. Also, the pressure of being compared to Jesus has resulted in some Rock Star Preachers taking devastating falls

when they were unable to perpetuate the illusion that they had created around themselves.

Of course, there is a danger in focusing too much on the distinction made between the teaching of the scribes and that of Jesus. One thing that we need to be careful of is to not use this story to justify criticizing the synagogue and scribes, and consequently attacking Judaism. This new teaching of Jesus was not what the people were used to hearing, and it probably contradicted much of what they had already learned. However, it is important to remember that the teaching of the scribes was primarily passing on the stories and traditions that had been repeated for centuries. Although the teachings were different, it did not mean that the scribes were the bad guys—at least, not in this instance.

As we read through this story, we may also have the temptation to question or debate Jesus' performing of miracles. Of course, there are more impressive miracles performed later in Mark, but this is the first miracle in Mark's Gospel. Unfortunately, when focusing too much on the miracle, and not enough on the story told around the miracle, we risk losing the essence of what God is trying to teach us. The miracle Jesus performs by casting out the demon in this story has more to do with demonstrating the authority of his teaching than it has to do with performing miracles. And his teachings certainly go hand in hand with his acts of mercy, healing and compassion.

Perhaps the most important thing for us to take away from this story is the ways in which Jesus demonstrates both his authority in teaching and his power in action. We might question whether organized religion has become more like the scribes—repeating the same stories over and over again—stories that have been handed down to us for generations, but forgetting the purpose of those stories?

Imagine, if you will, that you work for a company whose president found it necessary to travel out of the country and spend an extended period of time abroad. So he says to you and the other trusted employees, "Look, I'm going to leave. And while I'm gone, I want you to pay close attention to the business. You manage things while I'm away. I will write you regularly. When I do, I will instruct you in what you should do from now until I return from this trip." Everyone agrees.

He leaves and stays gone for a couple of years. During that time he writes often, communicating his desires and concerns. Finally he returns. He walks up to the front door of the company and immediately discovers everything is a mess—weeds flourishing in the flower beds, windows broken across the front of the building, the receptionist at the front desk snoozing, loud music blasting from several offices, two or three people playing floor hockey in a back hallway. Instead of making a profit, the business has suffered a great loss. Without hesitation he calls everyone together and with a frown asks, "What happened? Didn't you get my letters?"

You say, "Oh, yeah, sure. We got all your letters. We've even bound them in a book. And some of us have even memorized them. In fact, we have 'letter study' every Wednesday evening. You know, those were really great letters." I think the president would then ask, "But what did you do about my instructions?" And, no doubt the employees would respond, "Do? Well, nothing.

But they were great letters, and we read every one!"

Have we become like the scribes—studiously pouring over every word of Scripture—analyzing, exploring, investigating, memorizing and interpreting—but then, overlooking those who are scorned and rejected—those that society ignores, ignoring the opportunity to act on the information we have gathered.

This story presents to us a person who is suffering—from demons, or from mental illness, or from epilepsy—it doesn't really matter what we call it. He is there in the synagogue, he is in distress, and Jesus steps down from the pulpit—where he has just been teaching with authority—and he demonstrates the power of God by healing the man. Words and action. Authority and power.

Attending worship—attending Bible Studies—attending Sunday school—attending prayer meetings—personal devotions and prayers and Bible readings—all wonderful and necessary activities. But, as our story demonstrates—that is only half of the equation. What do we do with the knowledge that we have acquired?

This miracle of healing comes through the power and authority of Jesus' teaching, his speaking. The healing word Jesus speaks causes things to happen. We desire the same thing. When we read Scripture, or when we hear the word proclaimed, we want more than just information. We want the words we read and the words we hear to be bathed in the power and authority of the Son of the Living God—we want to believe that something wonderful can and will happen.

“What is this? A new teaching — with authority! Jesus speaks and things happen.” Not just information, but transformation. AMEN