

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Being God’s People: Learning”
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January 28, 2018

1 Samuel 4:1-11; Mark 1:21-28

Our Scripture today picks up right where we left off last week. As you recall, Jesus has just called the first 4 disciples and told them to follow him. Well – Jesus isn’t wasting any time! We are in the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry and he’s starting out with a bang – teaching in the synagogue and giving us our first miracle story by exorcizing an unclean spirit.

But what about this miracle story?

We know nothing about the man other than he had an unclean spirit. Many believe the unclean spirit represented the scribal establishment. But we don’t really know who he was, or what became of him. Did he even thank Jesus? Did he recognize Jesus as more than just a healer, and become a follower and believer? We never know. And perhaps the reason we never know is because that is not the point of the passage. The focus here is the authority of Jesus. The *authority of Jesus*. When people came to the synagogue, the teachers would present what they taught as “according to Moses” or “Rabbi whoever said...”

But Jesus taught on his own authority. This is a pivotal point that Mark wants us to understand. Jesus taught – and he taught on his own authority. And his teaching was *different*. This is a crucial conflict throughout the gospel – the challenge over authority between Jesus and the scribal establishment. As we’ve heard before - those with mental, emotional or physical impairments were kept on the fringes ... excluded from normal, everyday life in typical society. They were not only kept from the Temple, they were kept from interacting with their own community.

These laws of exclusion were intended to instill wholeness and purity – but they run contrary to everything Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God. A couple of weeks ago, Roger and I watched a movie called, “Music Within”, which was about the life of Richard Pimentel, whose advocacy was a major factor in the passage of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act). Richard has a really rocky childhood and enlists in the Army, where he is sent to Vietnam. While there, a mortar attack kills his best friend and leaves Richard with severe tinnitus, which effectively deafens him.

When he returns home, he enrolls in an Oregon college and befriends a brilliant man (Art) who has cerebral palsy and very limited use of his body, and whose speech is quite difficult to understand.

One day they go for pancakes at 3:00am and the waitress calls Art “the ugliest, most disgusting thing I have ever seen”, and they are told to leave. Richard and Art refused, and they were arrested for being “unsightly.” This was a *legal* arrest under the “Ugly Law”, which made it illegal for “deformed” people to appear in public. (As a point of interest, the last “Ugly Law” in the U.S. was not repealed until

1974.) It's not really all that long ago, is it? *This* is what Jesus is teaching us about. The teaching of the scribes involved holding to traditions that had been passed down for generations. I do not say this as a criticism of the scribal system or of first century Judaism.

But the teachings of Jesus are different – and he teaches with the utmost authority. Jesus is teaching that that which is contrary to the love of God is on the way out, including the holds on religious life endorsed by the synagogue and the Temple. Jesus often quoted Scripture to illuminate his teaching. But he spoke with an authority all his own -- not in disapproval of, but also not based on just the quoting of Scriptures.

We have no idea what words Jesus used in the synagogue for his teaching, but the exorcism story itself is a teaching. Jesus entered the synagogue to teach, and taught with words-- and with action ... all with authority. In English, we often use the words power and authority interchangeably. But in Greek there is a distinct difference. In Greek, the word for power is “dunamis”, from which we get the word dynamite. It refers to the capacity to influence the will or conduct of others. Power, might, strength. As social theorist Max Weber says, it has a coercive element.

The word for authority is “exousia”. It is non-coercive, and it means to have the right or privilege. It refers to position rather than power. And Jesus had divine authority. “Exousia” is the word used throughout today's reading. Jesus had both power and authority. But it is through his authority as the Son of God that he reaches out. For Mark, Jesus' miracles are blatantly connected to his teaching, and they tell us about the kingdom of God. And they challenge the organization of power.

Miracles were a re-inclusion into society for those who were kept on the margins. They reestablished right relationship with God, and with one's neighbors. That which we still desperately need today. We have come a long way from the days before the ADA, but not nearly far enough. The powers and the principalities, while often instituted with good intentions, sometimes work against that for which they were created. And what about those other areas to which we give authority? We allow even magazine ads and commercials to teach us that we don't measure up to the often frivolous standards of society. We give them unmerited power and authority.

Today's reading calls us back to recognize the ways in which we are kept from right relationship with God, and with each other. The people were “amazed.” But Jesus wasn't trying to amaze them, or us -- he was, and is, teaching. Where there is a teacher, there should also be a learner... and we must choose who our teachers are with discernment.

Jesus is asking us to learn from him, and to implement those learnings in our daily lives. Jesus has authority-- not over us, but for us.

And so that's the challenge for this week: What is Jesus teaching me today? And how am I living out that lesson in my life?