

A New Kind of Authority©

Mark 1:21-28

February 5, 2012

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Today, we look at Jesus' authority. Remember, we are looking at Jesus through the lens of Mark, the author of this gospel. While Mark's gospel is not listed first in the New Testament, scholars agree that Mark was the very first to be written down, some 35 years or so after Jesus' death.

Until now, the stories of Jesus have been told orally, not in writing. The disciples were not sitting down every night after a full day of ministry, journaling about what had happened and what Jesus had said. It is believed that for the most part, they were illiterate. They could not have written anything down. Jesus could have, but we don't have any record of that.

So, the stories of Jesus that had been told over and over are finally written down by people later on and they title each of the writings after a disciple. Perhaps the author of Mark's gospel had some direct information that came from Mark, the disciple, or from a friend or family member of Mark.

Remember that each one of the Gospel writers has a particular focus and message to a particular people in a particular time. As we read Mark, which we have been and will be through much of the next few months, we will notice that he has an urgency in his writing. He uses the word "immediately" quite often. He also writes about being "on the way". Mark's gospel is always moving towards the main thing with these extraordinary events that happen on the way, that tell something about who Jesus (in Mark's view) is.

Mark says Jesus came (comes) from Capernaum and goes into the synagogue to preach. There is a sense of it happening NOW in reading Mark.

The synagogue is a place that is full of authority. Pharisees and Priests and Scribes: keepers and interpreters of the law (in a way, like preachers and teachers today.) Those who have studied a subject and are knowledgeable about that subject are considered an authority on it.

Of course, we have other authorities. We call the "authorities" when we have a question about, or a crime committed against, the law. The police are considered authorities.

There are good authorities and then there are those who have way too much power and who exercise their authority in a way that is oppressive and hurtful to those whom they have authority over. Hitler comes to mind, as well as Saddam Hussein and other dictators.

They would be called “authoritarians” – those who have complete, or almost complete, control over one or more people. Those who are more concerned with having people obey laws than having some freedom is an example of an authoritarian government. An authoritarian is a person who expects everyone to do what he says to do.

I think we could safely say that some of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, as well as the Roman government at that time, were authoritarian in the way they exercised power.

So, the people are used to that kind of learned, practiced authoritarian style of teaching, but when this new man comes on the scene from dusty little Nazareth, he gets up and teaches them and they are blown away by the authority in which he teaches.

It’s different. It’s ... authentic. It’s genuine, with passion and it’s as if the Word he is teaching – the Scriptures he is preaching about – actually pours out from him. Almost like he IS that Word!

Unlike Matthew, who goes into a lot of detail telling us what Jesus said and taught (as in the Sermon on the Mount), Mark doesn’t give us all that information. I guess he doesn’t because what Jesus specifically taught wasn’t as much the point, for Mark, as HOW he taught.

The people said it (A new kind of authority!)

Then we get into what happens next. For modern readers, we find this next thing a bit hard to grasp.

A poor man comes in who, Mark says, is possessed by an unclean spirit. We aren’t really sure what to make of unclean spirits (or demons) today, are we? We can rationalize it by saying those were primitive beliefs about what was probably some type of mental disorder or something. And quite possibly that’s true.

But, you see, if we rationalize too much, we lose the main thrust, the great value of what Mark’s point is. Someone said in one of the commentaries I read that we may have stopped believing in evil but it obviously still exists. We may experience it in a different way, but we still do experience evil, at times.

Jesus authority stresses transformation, freedom, caring for the poor, feeding the hungry ... it’s about justice! It isn’t about medicine or curses, or magic; the miracle in his authority is the authentic power to change lives.

It’s interesting that through out Mark’s gospel, the disciples and the people have a hard time seeing who Jesus is. Even those who are closest to him don’t recognize him.

In our class this past Thursday night, led by Barb Brown, we heard how in Mark, even Jesus' own family doesn't know who he is. They come, at one point, to take him home because they believe he's gone crazy. No one seems to understand him.

Mark's point through out the gospel is to help people see the real Jesus. Jesus, the Christ. The Messiah. But, of course, he is not the Messiah they were looking for, so they did not know who he was. They actually were looking for an authoritarian leader who would take charge and destroy those in power; who would rule in their favor. Jesus' leadership was completely the opposite of what they were looking for.

No one recognizes Jesus except for one group. Listen to who that includes: "Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and (the unclean spirit) 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.'"

Maybe no one else knows who he is, but the demons recognize him. They are uneasy, afraid, and they know their time is up. They've met their match with this one who comes with this new authority. They know what power Jesus has.

Instead of Mark telling us what Jesus teaches, he tells us what Jesus does. Jesus' authority is shown in action. He practices what he preaches. He raises the bar of authority now. He sends the demon, the unclean spirit packing and the man is set free. Transformation and justice have taken place by the authority and power of Jesus. Not only does Mark show us what Jesus does, but who Jesus is!

Okay, so we see that Jesus surprises the people with this new authority and he will continue it throughout his ministry. We see that evil spirits rise up and are stirred up and even leave with Jesus present.

But what does it have to do with us?

Well, might I suggest that it has plenty to do with us in our ordinary, hum drum lives; in a day when it seems everyone is an authority on just about everything, thus making no one much of an authority at all. With the invention of the Internet and Wikipedia, you can find out just about anything on any subject. In the '60's they wore buttons that said 'Question authority!' Today, those buttons might say "Where IS authority?"

No longer is knowledge about medicine limited to doctors or theology limited to preachers and teachers. You may not have the depth of knowledge that someone who has studied it has, but you can certainly get enough information that you feel that there is nothing new to learn and no one to look up to in a certain field.

I'm not bashing the Internet, I'm just pointing out that the awe of authority has waned with many people. I would guess that we could relate to the people in Jesus' day who

were pretty sure they'd seen it all. As Qoheleth said in Ecclesiastes: "There was nothing new under the sun."

But with the coming of Jesus on the scene, there was a freshness and an authenticity and action. There was transformation. Call it an evil spirit or a demon – call it what you will – but we still today have those things that raise up their ugly heads and keep us captive, keep us from having the freedom to live and to love and to feel close to God and one another. Alcoholism, the demons of drug addiction, the draw of pornography, fear and desire all come to mind, as definite demons that ride our backs and cling to us, keeping us from being free.

I like the way Mark tells the story as if it is happening now. This is the gospel, he says, of Jesus Christ. This is the good news for all about a man who ushers in the Kingdom of Heaven right here among us by setting us free and transforming our lives and calling us to follow him (even when we, just like those 12 disciples) are not always sure of who Jesus is.

He calls us anyway, to follow and to trust and to grow and learn. To keep learning and – believe it or not, to be like him – with authority! Yes, we are given authority as well, as his followers. We have been given the power and the knowledge to pass on this good news of God's love and mercy and salvation, thus setting others free from the things that bind them up and hold them in bondage.

This is a new authority. It is one that gives freedom, not one that dictates and punishes. This is one that seeks humble living, mercy giving and justice for the oppressed. This is an authority that pours out from our depths, from our hearts and spirits because we have experienced the same transformation. It is authentic and genuine and joyful. It is that last shall be first and first last kind of authority that we who are in Christ have come to learn from him.

And I think, whether that is the gospel, good news of Jesus day or today it is just what we need to hear and it is certainly what we want to share.

Jesus didn't just come. Jesus still comes to you today to transform your life and to set you free. Allow yourself to find awe in that authority. It will change your life forever.

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