

“And he could do no deed of power there.” Mark 6:5a

Perhaps the chuckles were muffled, but I really found today’s sermon passages to be funny. A lot of times we don’t give ourselves permission for this to be our first response, but it is what it is. Here’s Jesus, new to the ministry scene but as the gospels emphasize, his hometown, his family’s reputation and even father’s occupation gave him a reputation.

Mark says, “*He went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching.*” Using the word, “astounded” is softening the reaction, I believe – “shocked witless” would come closer. The word around town would soon be, “Aren’t you sorry you missed temple this week, wait’ll you hear who got up to speak.”

The congregation quickly distinguishes Jesus from the normal preachers: “*He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*” We’ll talk about authority in a bit, but that statement was sure a poke in the priests’ ribs. The worshipers, I am sure, were settling down for what is expected to be another Friday evening of high platitudes and legal hair splitting among the elites, with little being directed to the average Joel in the pew.

Instead of just running the mouth, Jesus talked the talk about the Word of God and then lo and behold walked the walk. “*Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit.*” Can you anticipate your reaction if all of a sudden our double oak doors swung open and a troubled, disheveled man walk in, stood in the center of the aisle, and raised his hands to get the preacher’s attention? “This oughta be good!” The scribes’ first thought would be, “How did he get in?” It was strictly forbidden for the quote, “unclean” to enter the synagogue.

Then the man 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.”* But Jesus rebuked him, saying, *“Be silent, and come out of him!”* And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. Unless the unclean spirit sounded like what came out of Linda Blair’s mouth in the *Exorcist*, his questions don’t sound demonic or psychotic to me. They are rhetorical questions that we may have asked in our honest conversations with Jesus. [say in pleasant voice] *“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.”* Furthermore, this man offers the first proclamation or testimonial from any person in Mark linking Jesus as the Holy One of God.

Mark concludes this passage by saying, *“They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”* At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. They must have certainly been amazed. There was even no “what is he doing healing on the Sabbath?” condemnation. Jesus’ fame, more likely his spectacle, became the talk of the town.

*“What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”* “Authority” is one of those words we should use carefully in this post-20<sup>th</sup> century aftershock. Might our church rummage sale sport an old donated popular tee shirt that reads, “Question Authority?” Wasn’t that the banner cry of the latter half the 1960’s and clear into mid-seventies? Authority? Even today, discussion in our Wednesday Bible Study upon looking at these scriptures, bemoaned that recognition of due and rightful authority is lacking.

Police officers are not treated with proper respect as they are doing their job to keep the peace and promote public safety. When teachers discipline a student, they are routinely called to the principal's office to defend their necessary action to angry parents who automatically accuse them and say that their precious son or daughter could do no wrong. How has the authority of our branches of government been perceived or followed with allegiance? It doesn't stop there. In sharp contrast to the 1950's when you'll find at least four ministers listed in the ranks of the top ten most influential people, today, not one minister ranks in the top fifty. Whom do you respect with authority and what type of authority do you possess?

The author of our Wednesday Bible Group study guide on Mark, Ronald Edward Peters, defines authority as having *capacity, ability and power*. Jesus stood out because he had these qualities. Today, many people choose their leaders because they give the impression that they are "just like us." They would be ones that we would want to sit down and have a beer with. Perhaps Jesus would do that too, but he clearly stood out and rose above us in his capacity to love, his ability to teach and his power to affect change from the status quo. Ronald Peters writes:

"Jesus' public ministry was anything but anemic, low-key, or forgettable. Clearly, there was nothing mediocre about Jesus. On the contrary, Jesus and his ministry were vigorous, attracted much attention and made deep impressions on people. Unlike the scribes, Pharisees or others claiming strong religious convictions, Jesus taught with authority. Not only was Jesus a powerful figure in the sense of the good he accomplished, but those whose lives he touches also became powerful by accomplishing good things or acquiring positive characteristics previously beyond their reach."

Perhaps you will remember our litany from last week: “Being a follower of Christ is not a matter of skill, resources, or membership as is inclusion on the roll of a club or a fraternity. Being a follower of Christ – a disciple – is a matter of understanding one’s capacities of faith in Christ Jesus. It means following, being a student, being like a mentor, a guide, a teacher, one who sets an example of authority, not in a dominating sense, but in an empowering sense. Following Christ means learning to do what Christ did. Being a disciple means helping others recognize their capacities for improved lives through faith in Christ. It means bringing healing to those places that are sick and broken. It means bringing life to those places where only death reigns. People are called by God into a disciple relationship to have a positive influence in life. In Mark 6:7, Jesus called the disciples, divided them into pairs, and then gave them *authority*.”

I included the second reading from Mark 6 today because I was struck by the remarkable similarities to our first reading but also the poignant truth that was revealed at the end and from which this sermon is titled. Like first in Capernaum, Jesus preached in his hometown of Nazareth. People there were also shocked witless. They questioned his wisdom and his deeds of power. They questioned his authority, right? “*And he could do no deed of power there.*”

Because he did not have the prayerful support of his people, his congregation, and his community, Jesus’ power in ministry was compromised. This stands to make us seek new understanding of the notions of an omnipotent God. We are needed! Jesus needs us to exert his capacity, ability and power! We are Christ’s hands and feet! Jesus’ authority is most certainly relational. As we hit hard every night we gather in our Journeymen group here at St. Peter’s, if we are not in relation to or in relationship with others, we are nothing!

Our spiritual leaders and our church need your prayerful support and involvement! You might, think, what possible change could I make? The capacity of the disciples to fulfill their roles had little relationship with their ability to *do* anything. Their success in completing the divinely assigned task was contingent on their ability to *be* who God called them to be.

In Nazareth, the clear implication is that if they had believed in him, Jesus could have done a great deal more. The spiritual climate and vitality of a church, like St. Peter's, its sense of expectancy, its openness to the power of God at work through Jesus Christ, will in fact have a great deal to do with how much God's power can accomplish in a particular community, like Washington. Our unbelief, apathy or lethargy does not render God useless, but when it is dominant in a congregation its dampening effect on the mighty acts of God in that time and place is evident and sad.

“What have you to do with us Jesus? Pity the thoughts that go: “Mind your business. Our business is our own. Get back to Palestine. Get back to the Bible. Get back to the church. Get back anywhere, so long as you don't interfere.”

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to save us? I know who you are, you are the Holy One of God.”