

**Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV)**

1:21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.

1:22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

1:23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

1:24 and he 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."

1:25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"

1:26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

1:27 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."

1:28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

From its very beginning, Mark's gospel doesn't hesitate to let us know that Jesus is called and credentialed to bring about God's world. The prophets have foretold it. The Evangelist has baptized Jesus. God has affirmed Jesus. The wilderness has even tempted and tested Jesus. Jesus is ready!!!

Last week, Jesus told the earliest disciples (and you and me as well), that the work has begun. Jesus invited them (and you and me as well) to fish for people. Jesus reminded us that, we, too, are credentialed, and called to do God's work in the world.

This week, the credentials and calling of Jesus are affirmed in the way Jesus demonstrates authority.

I believe it's helpful for us to consider, briefly, the meaning of the word *authority*. In most instances, we tend to understand authority as a noun: authority is a power capable of being possessed or obtained.

Merriam-Webster's most common definition says that authority is "the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience." Local leaders have a formalized power – a title, a badge, a platform – to enforce the will of the ruler, monarch, or ultimate leader.

Such a definition describes the authority wielded by scribes in first-century synagogues. These were elite and learned men of the priestly order, and there was always at least one of them in a village like Capernaum, who were charged with interpreting and enforcing the community standards.

I think it's fair to say that in the Roman era, many scribes were in a difficult position: they wanted to protect the institution of Judaism, but

do so in a delicate enough manner so as to not upset the local Roman authorities. I think it's also fair to say that their expression of authority, that is their interpretation and application of law, might often advance Roman or personal interests rather than those of their faith communities.

Merriam-Webster offers a lesser-used, even tertiary definition of authority: "The power to influence others, especially because of one's commanding manner or one's recognized knowledge about something."

I believe this third definition is a better way to describe the authority of Jesus. When Jesus invites the disciples to fish for people, Jesus doesn't call the local wildlife office for a fishing license, nor does Jesus procure the services, recommendations, and equipment of the local sporting goods store. Jesus uses his intuition, and his charisma, and his authenticity to invite others into meaningful conversations and relationships.

When Jesus decides to visit the synagogue, he doesn't call ahead and ask the corresponding secretary for a formal invitation to speak, or to be introduced into the order of worship. Nor does Jesus rely on formal documentation of his training, or formal expression of his legitimacy. The oratory, presence, and overall umph of Jesus exhibit his authority.

The scribes may claim to hold authority, but it's really the Authorities that have a hold on the scribes.

Jesus, on the other hand, not only hold authority, but he HAS authority, too. And what Mark's gospel lets us know today is that Jesus is gonna use his authority in unique and authentic ways.

The text's movements substantiate this claim. Let's start with the synagogue. In those days, the synagogue in Capernaum was akin to a town square or forum. It was a place to gather. You can get a sense of its size and shape by looking at the picture on the front of our worship guide.

Directionally, the townspeople are used to going into or toward the synagogue. And once there, the townspeople are received by scribes, who would teach or interpret texts in such a way as to enforce their personal authority. The scribes used Torah to fortify their systems, not to embolden and empower their people, nor to imagine God's possibilities. Theirs is a power, or an authority, that requires people to be drawn in, and in many instances coerced to stay in line. They don't have power because of their presence, they have power because of the force their presence might possibly exert.

But Jesus doesn't wait for people to come to him. Jesus fishes where the people are. Jesus enters the town square, and offers his teachings and ideas. The people respond to Jesus, and recognize his authority, not for fear of what might happen if they don't, but rather, because in Jesus, they notice one who channels real strength and real power.

Up to this point in Mark's gospel, it's clear to everyone who has thus far encountered Jesus, that Jesus has a real sense of authority. And how will Jesus use his authority? We're told almost immediately.

A person with an unclean spirit cries out among the congregation. Some force, some metaphorical demon prevents this person from claiming their wholeness. I know a lot of people will identify this scene an exorcism. I think that's fine, but I don't believe such an expression captures our story.

Maybe this person has a severe mental illness that intrudes on their ability to express their inner beauty; maybe this person has a form of epilepsy, and from time to time, seizures wrest control of their senses. Or maybe, maybe this person is just overwhelmed by grief. Maybe they are overwhelmed by a system that never affirms them for expressing their real gifts; maybe the local leaders have spent so much time equating shame with love, that nobody can ever have a clean spirit in this place, because a clean and whole community might jeopardize the entire operation. Maybe it's not so much that an unclean spirit is being removed in the midst of the gathered community, but rather, that the gathered community is falsely labeling unclean, that which is in all reality, a beautiful, whole, clean, wonderful, valued, God-made spirit.

I don't believe Jesus is healing via extraction or exorcism. I believe what Jesus is telling to "Get outta here!" is this person's dependence on an outdated credentialing process. The scribes, and others in traditional roles of power, used Torah to rigidly define God's hospitality and healing. God can only be hospitable and benevolent if the community operates within the bounds of a system where those in power can declare what is clean, and whole, and valued. And in such a system, power isn't shared.

But what does Jesus do? Jesus empowers this person to feel whole, and connected, and valued. Jesus uses his authority in a way that makes God more accessible to the community, and invites the recipients of such healing and power-sharing to go and do likewise. Jesus isn't using power to fuel a system; Jesus is using power to build the beloved community. And in the coming weeks, as his authority becomes more evident and visible to those around him, Jesus will shun all attempts to make him consolidate or hoard such authority.

Jesus shows us that divine authority is not born of monarchs, nor is it administered like a local magistrate. Real authority is claimed and shared in the love of God, and love of neighbor.

A few other things are not lost on me in discerning this text. We live in an age of modern medicine and ever-evolving scientific discovery. We are sophisticated, or at least we carry ourselves that way. And when we hear a word like demon or monster, even in metaphorical terms, we get a little itchy, anxious to dismiss such superstitions as ancient and irrelevant language, unworthy of intellectual pursuit. Not something to take all that seriously.

But I wonder, is there a better word than demon or unclean spirit to describe the monstrous isms of our world? Are not racism, and sexism, and classism, and agism, and unhinged nationalism, and corporate narcissism forces that inhibit, and drown out, and even torture the very best components of ourselves? Do they not contort us? Do they not subdue the authenticity of our voices? Are they not the first to identify, and fearfully, the power and presence of Jesus? They object to sincere authority. They object to God's good purposes, and our individual and collective callings.

Mark tells us those voices are gonna get louder. Mark tells us those voices are gonna keep on objecting. And Mark tells us that Jesus isn't gonna be deterred. Jesus has the kind of authority that heals monsters, that tames unruly seas, that illumines life in lifeless places. And Jesus invites us to come along for the journey.

I believe today's text is also a challenge to every faith community. We tend to see ourselves as heroes in the text. We aren't like those scribes.

I'm not saying we are. But we have our traditions. And we certainly feel more comfort in neighbors moving toward us rather than us toward them. And brave as we may be, open as we may be, creative as we may be, much like the scribes, we often struggle to summon the authority than can silence the monstrous voices and objections of those nasty isms. Comfort can soften our convictions. Familiarity can delay our desire for needed change. The privilege of normalcy, the convenience and simplicity of definition can make us overlook the beauty and much-needed messiness of fluidity.

We don't all have to be the same perfect people under the steeple. We don't even have to be the people under the steeple. We simply have to be the people. God's beautiful, credentialed, created people.

I wonder, Millbrook Baptist Church, if we were to recognize the authority of Jesus, what kind of lunch counters might we integrate; what kind of demons might we exorcise; what kind of callings might we discern; what kind of community might we find? I dare say, it might be one where people are full; where inner beauty is recognized; where encouraged gifts turn outlandish dreams into realized callings; where sisters, brothers, kindred, ALL have the authority to be as God created them to be.

Jesus has shown us a new kind of authority. And next week, he's gonna go to Peter's house. I'm going with him. And I hope you'll come, too!

Friends may it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.