

“The Authority of Christ”
Mark 1:21-28 (NRSV)

Last week, in accounting for **the success of Jesus’ preaching ministry**, I observed how our Lord fulfilled the classic understanding of effective communication. He possessed a good grasp of his subject; his reasoning made sense. He was transparent and authentic; his own life echoed his what he had to say. And he had an amazing compassion for and connection with his audience. Unfortunately, these characteristics are not always found in everyone who preaches the gospel. There are many who urge others to higher spiritual experience and greater moral excellence, yet who do not seem themselves to display what they’re asking others to exhibit or achieve.

Preachers need to be careful their preaching hasn’t become like the **train conductor who came to feel he’d been to all the towns which he’d announced in passengers’ ears** and for which he’d sold them tickets, for years, when in fact he’d never stepped off the train outside of his own station (Phillips Brooks, Lectures in Preaching, 1899, p. 25-26)! To put it another way, **it’s possible for a preacher’s soul to become so cauterized by handling the truth, that he or she no longer feels it**. Indeed, there are also many **so-called “Christians”** who don’t appear to be able to back up what they say with their lives either, though they’ve been telling the truth with apparent accuracy and fidelity for years.

Jesus Christ wasn’t like that. Neither are those who truly follow him. **Jesus’ point, his passion, and his feeling, fired his message**. For example, so intense was his compassion for the people to whom he preached that he wept over the impenitent city of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37; Lk. 19:41-42). Jesus was infused with a passionate zeal to communicate the gospel because **he cared**. Did he shout or pound his pulpit? I don’t think so; he rarely preached from behind a pulpit. Yet, it’s abundantly clear from the gospel records that people got the impression there was intense feeling behind everything he uttered. Passion can be communicated as easily in a whisper as in a shout. Jesus was also one of the most passionate communicators in history because he **believed in his message**. Sadly, some preachers don’t. But Jesus knew what was in people’s hearts; he knew the eternal issues that find their place in people’s choices. That’s why the four fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James and John – followed him to become fishers of people, and that’s why they became people of purpose and mission, and that’s why they were able to transcend their provincial world.

1. **Jesus Christ's authority – his marvelous preaching** (Mk. 1:21-22).

In the text before us, with his four new found, eager disciples in tow, **Jesus intensified his ministry**. What we have is Peter's eyewitness account as given to Mark. "They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (21:21-22).

Capernaum was a flower-bedecked village on the upper northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, about two miles west from where the Jordan flowed into the lake. Some say it was Peter's hometown. Visitors today can see the foundations of a house that might well have been his mother's, as well as of a fourth-century synagogue that may well have been built on the site of the original synagogue mentioned in this passage. In any case, the congregation, on the day Jesus and his companions arrived, would have consisted of humble townsfolk: fishermen, merchants, craftspeople, laborers and their wives.

Just as you and I are doing today, **Jesus and his disciples would have joined in** the opening words, the praise, the reading of Scripture, the sermon, prayers and the final blessing of **the service of worship**. Synagogue services were much like our services are today. Only, this time **Jesus -- as a visiting rabbi -- was invited to offer the sermon**. Did he get the invitation ahead of time? Did he have time to prepare his message, or was it an impromptu invitation? I don't know. But you can bet people were eager to hear what this local boy who'd made good and who was causing such a stir in the countryside would have to say! And they were not disappointed. The text says they were "**astounded at his teaching**" (1:22). Literally, they were "given a shock"; we'd say, "they were thunderstruck" (Barclay, p. 25). **Jesus' preaching carried a powerful punch**.

Of course, much of this was due to the fact **Jesus was so real, so true, so authentic, and so utterly, passionately sincere**. But as important as these characteristics of a preacher are, the text suggests the crux of Jesus' success among the common people lay in **what he had to say, on the power of his reasoning and in the way he convinced them** of what he said: "because he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." Although Mark doesn't tell us what the text or the title or the theme of the sermon was, **Jesus was able to get his message across**. And his message had more relevance than the usual religious rigmarole.

The “scribes,” who were largely Pharisees, **were in bondage to quotation marks – they loved to quote the authorities.** “On the one hand, Rabbi Hillel says, . . . , but on the other hand, Rabbi Gamaliel says And then, there is Rabbi Eleazer’s testimony!” It was confusing; what were people to believe? And it was largely second-hand theology! The scribes’ labyrinthine and legalistic distinctions were often boring and petty; and, what was worse, their message exuded no spontaneity, no joy!

When Jesus spoke he was just the opposite. Right from the get-go, he engaged his audience. To be sure, there were some quotations – he often quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) – “You have heard that it was said,” But then, Jesus added his own interpretation of the passage, “But I say to you,” He explained “the Law and the Prophets.” He was clear and simple (although not simplistic), as all great preachers of the Word have been and are. He did not say, “I am the eschatological manifestation of the Ground of Being, the kerygma in which you will find your ultimate being, if you are supralapsarian, making no excuse, agreeing that God had decreed he would precook Adam’s goose!”

What a lesson to those four new fishers of people! To be sure, they didn’t sit down and analyze Jesus’ sermon that day in all its classical categories. But, no doubt, they learned how to share the gospel by his example. They knew he was genuine. They knew he cared passionately. They saw how he handled God’s Word, proclaiming it simply and clearly. And thus, as they ministered in Jesus Christ’s name, empowered by his example, they also exhibited his marvelous authority, for the Holy Spirit is always pleased to use such messengers.

If we want to communicate in your talk and walk what it means to be a Christian, the authority given by God’s Holy Spirit must be part of our life. We need not so much to possess the message, but rather, to **let the message possess us.** If we want people to see that God’s Word is real, we need to be passionate about it and to declare it simply, clearly. There’s no use in just going through the motions. People need to know we understand it and that we mean it. **C. S. Lewis** once said unless someone can “put the gospel into vulgar (or common) speech, he/she either doesn’t understand or believe it.” But if we can do this, and actually do it, then there will be power, authority and life communicated between parent and child, between son and daughter, between teacher and student, and between preacher and people.

2. **Jesus Christ's authority – his miraculous power** (Mk. 1:23-26).

We don't know when **the opposition** came, or who **the opposer** was, but as people sat in that synagogue, thunderstruck by Jesus' teaching and preaching, "a man with an unclean spirit ... cried out, 'What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God'" (1:23-24). Mark this, get closer to Jesus Christ and his message, and opposition will always appear from somewhere.

The light of Jesus' proclamation was too much for the evil of a demonized life. Just as foul things scurry from the light when you lift a stone up from the ground or the seashore, evil spirits who "love... darkness rather than light" (Jn. 3:19) recoil from the light.

Friends, **it's possible to recognize Jesus for who he is and, yet, to hate him all the more.** That was Lenin's and Stalin's response (Stalin was a former seminary student!) and that was Hitler's response as well. That's what was happening here. This man wanted to have nothing to do with Jesus Christ because he knew what a difference that would have to make in his life. He wanted Jesus Christ to leave him alone, and to go away (William L. Lane, *Mark*, 1975, p. 73). He was worried that Jesus Christ would destroy his life as he knew it (*Ibid.*), and he wasn't ready to give it up.

From this encounter we learn that whenever the authority of Jesus Christ is invoked in preaching or teaching there's going to be a violent confrontation with the evil spirits that seek to possess men's and women's, even young peoples,' souls and rule their lives. This is what **Billy Graham** and others who've ministered all around the globe tell us they've experienced, and this is what will continue to happen until the end of the world. Jesus himself later warned his disciples that this kind of opposition would always come in response to the proclamation of his gospel (Mk. 13:22-23; Matt. 24:24-25).

I want you to see that **this demonized man** – whatever you make of him – **was completely under the sway of evil.** His personality had been damaged to the point that some demonic spirit had been able to usurp the very core of his being and was even able to utilize his voice. I'll tell you, I'm not a great believer in the demonization of people; some people are very good at casting in certain spirits that they later want to cast out! But **evil incarnate is real.**

Just ask General **Romeo Dallaire**, whose apt book about the terrible genocide in Rwanda is entitled Shake Hands with the Devil (2003). Or, ask **James Orbinski**, MD, another Canadian and past President of Medecins Sans Frontieres, who documents his experiences in his book, An Imperfect Offering: Humanitarian Action in the Twenty-First Century (2008), what he thinks of what some people are capable.

You see, as far as Christians are concerned, **the Adversary always tries to imitate God**. We know that by his Holy Incarnation, Jesus Christ came to earth in human flesh, and now dwells in us by his Spirit. Therefore, aping God, Satan fabricates incarnation through his spirits. This man was lost; he was a kennel for any malevolent spirit sniffing around and seeking a home. He was “unclean”; he didn’t want Jesus Christ messing around with his life; he was completely under Satan’s power.

Jesus Christ had been challenged. Very likely there was **stone-silence** for a moment in the synagogue of that day. Perhaps only the quiet rhythm of the lapping of the water of the Sea of Galilee could be heard just outside the door. As they say today, “You could’ve heard a pin drop.” Then Jesus responded by rebuking the man, saying, **“Be silent...!”** (1:25a). Literally, he was saying, “Be muzzled!” “Shut your face!” Then he added, addressing the demon directly, **“...come out of him!”** (1:25b). Then the Bible records, **“the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him”** (1:26). The poor man was racked with violent convulsions before the horror-stricken congregation, and the demon departed with an inarticulate howling shriek, having been forbidden to say another word. This formerly audacious and angry man, who’d suddenly appeared before the congregation, and who was then caused to fall down helpless before them in dust and despair, was now restored to wholeness and joy and peace. Wow! What an exorcism! This was pretty dramatic stuff!

Here’s the message: **there is help and hope for the worst of us**. You (or someone you know) may have the hardest heart in the country. He/she may be the worst blasphemer, murderer, pervert, atheist, what have you. To you, and to everyone else, this person appears impenetrable, irredeemable, impossible. Yet there is help and hope for that person.

Further, whatever your own condition or situation, there is help and hope for you as well. You may have the proudest will – a “damned will,” if you will in the full sense of the word – you are bloodied, unbowed, unbroken,

condemned. Since you were a child you have never given in to anyone, not even your parents or your mate. Yet there is great help and hope for you. **Jesus Christ can free you from any evils that have you in bondage.**

As far as **Martin Luther** was concerned, this is “the gist of the gospel.” Commenting on a passage a little later in Mark’s Gospel he wrote,

No one is so high, or may rise so high, that he/she need not fear becoming the lowliest. Conversely, no one has fallen, or may fall so deeply as to preclude all hope of becoming the highest. By saying “the first shall be last” Christ takes away all presumption away from you and forbids you to exalt yourself above any prostitute even though you were Abraham, David, Peter or Paul. But by saying “the last shall be first” he guards you against all despair and forbids you to cast yourself under the feet of any saint, even though you were Pilate, Herod, Sodom and Gomorrah.” (commenting on Mk. 10:17-31)

What we learn from Christ’s action is that **his gospel of love and power is for all, even the least and worst of us.** Do you think yourself least likely? Know this: Jesus rejoices to change your life with a word. And he will, if only you will come to him, or let him. Will you?

The text we have considered this morning shows **four new fishermen under the authority of Jesus Christ.** These **four new Christian recruits saw the people thunderstruck at his teaching** because “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” As time progressed **they put his authority to use** in their own lives. **Think of Peter at Pentecost!** Think of his own personality transformation, his own newfound empathy for others, and his powerfully convincing message. He preached in the authority of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and thousands were changed (Acts 2). These **four that saw the demoniac healed** came to see that what happened to him was **a symbol of all the great and gracious things that God would do** for anyone who came to him in whatever state or frame of mind.

We are the Church, the Body of Christ, which by definition has to do with those who have become indwelt by the Spirit of God. **Our lives are to speak and exhibit God’s Word authoritatively.**

Not only that, but as the Church of Christ, “the bride of Christ” we are to be made “holy by cleansing ... with the washing of water by the word, so as to present [ourselves] to him ... in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind” (Eph. 5:26-27). Therefore **we are to be involved in all kinds of deliverance ministries.**

Jesus is with us. His authority rests with us, his Church (Matt. 28:18-20).
Let us possess that authority and use it with humility and energy and grace!

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
Calvin Presbyterian Church, Abbotsford, BC
October 3, 2010 -- Worldwide Communion Sunday