

Fourth Sunday in Epiphany - January 29, 2006  
Student minister – Irene Jenkins  
Mark 1:21-28  
1 Cor 8:1-13

### The *How* vs. the *What* of Authority

This is my first sermon. I was pretty nervous thinking about preaching. But Dudley said, “Don’t worry. Why don’t you preach January 29<sup>th</sup>? It’s a great passage about speaking with authority.” Thanks Dudley... Well, this morning I’d like to explore this passage together with you, for authority, how it’s spoken and how it’s used, has vexed religious people from the beginning. Even now, faulty understanding of authority often does more damage than good, often in God’s name.

Mark begins by telling us that Jesus is a guest teacher in a synagogue on the northwestern shore of Galilee. This is hardly an unusual event since they would often invite new speakers on the Sabbath. What Mark does highlight as unique is the reaction of the worshippers. They were “astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes”. It is understood that the scribes are professional interpreters of Jewish Law, known for carrying out extensive analysis of the law and its historical interpreters.

Though Jesus was also known to have a command over the laws, this passage indicates that what struck his audience was his dismissal of historical interpretation. Rather than rattle off the recycled thoughts of the Rabbis, Jesus spoke in simple and meaningful language. His authority came through trust and respect as opposed to power and knowledge.

We see a parallel story of Jesus’ teaching within the Gospel of Luke. Luke also emphasizes the authority with which Jesus spoke. However, unlike Mark, he focuses on WHAT Jesus taught on the Sabbath as opposed to HOW he taught. Jesus appeared in the synagogue and spoke from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Following these words, he rolled up the scroll and sat down. In Mark’s account, we are asked to focus on HOW Jesus presents his message, whereas Luke hones in upon WHAT he was teaching.

On the face of things, we could work towards a fuller understanding of Mark’s story by combining it with that of Luke. After all, many people prefer Luke’s account because it gives more direction to the congregants. However, I want to suggest that weaving the accounts together causes us to MISS the power of Mark’s message. Perhaps Mark was intentional about his exclusion of Jesus’ actual message. We can learn more from what Mark leaves out than what he keeps in. If he has left out the WHAT of the teachings, we are left to learn from the HOW.

In particular, Jesus gained authority by healing the man with an unclean spirit upon his entrance into the synagogue. Typically a religious leader would not have laid a hand on the unclean, since it was thought that ‘one bad apple might spoil the bunch’. However, Jesus confronted him directly and silenced the impure or demonic spirit within this man, showing that the bad apples can be redeemed.

Jesus' audience was floored by the fact that even the unclean in spirit were able to recognize his identity as the "Holy One of God". By highlighting Jesus' actions rather than his knowledge of Jewish Law, Mark's gospel gives us cause to consider the type of authority which is preferable to God and whether our priorities lay in following God or in simply appearing to be pure and blameless.

Though we live in a time when there are many who want to stake claim over our allegiance, whether it's our boss, president of the United States, the media, or the folks who hand out those little 'have you been saved?' pamphlets, we ought to consider who and where we give our faithfulness. Jesus' emphasis on action as opposed to hollow knowledge of past law is something that can resonate with us as a UCC denomination.

Rather than cite numerous historical and scriptural arguments to defend one reading of the Bible, we have created a comma where some place a period. Unfortunately, some people might see this as being wishy-washy, or unable to 'take a stand' on issues. I hope that Mark's emphasis on Jesus' authentic authority can show us that it is not about WHAT we are saying at every moment, but rather HOW we are taking authority.

To assume that we will always know God's will through Bible study is an affront on the wideness of God's presence in our lives. We can glean HOW we approach situations, but we cannot claim knowledge of the WHAT in every scenario.

To bring this example into context, imagine someone who is guilty of a crime and is asked to explain him or herself. If he or she chooses to lie, then it is likely that a laundry list of reasons and excuses will follow. In contrast, one who is innocent is more likely to calmly describe the scenario. We can see a correlation between frantically explaining oneself and feeling unsure about what we are saying. In a similar fashion, Jesus did not need to rely upon the past teachings because he was a living testament to the truth to which he aligned his life. As we read the Bible, there are many cases where you can get bogged down with the minutiae of laws and practice. However, the Gospel of Mark can give us backing for the simplicity movement. We need to live and act according to God's principles, not spend hours proving our innocence.

One such example comes from the political campaign of Illinois senator Barack Obama. Running against the Conservative Republican Alan Keyes, Obama was up against a modern-day scribe. Whenever Keyes spoke, he would passionately defend traditional values and back his argument with biblical proof. As he spoke, Keyes would get anxious and speak quickly, as though his argument wouldn't hold true if he couldn't bombard his listener with proof.

Conversely, Obama presented himself calmly as if he didn't have to prove his authenticity. In his words, "It is that fundamental belief—I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper—that makes this country work". Voters across the board remarked feeling a level of trust in the authority which Obama possessed. Though we should be weary of likening human authority to that of Jesus, we can at least strive to cultivate the type of genuine authority and authenticity which comes from the HOW of our lives and character rather than the WHAT of hollow promises and testament.

To bring this back to the context of our denomination, we can learn much from the ‘authority’ that various congregations command. One example comes from the topic of homosexual marriage. A local Boston church issued a decree on their position against homosexual practice. The defense referenced 15 sources over the span of two paragraphs.

Rather than scrutinize over historical opinion like the scribes, Mark shows us that authentic authority comes in one’s actions and lived testament. As part of the UCC denomination, we agree to spend our time trying to understand the HOW of a healthy and mutual love rather than ruling out the WHAT of particular unions.

We can find a parallel message in this morning’s passage from Corinthians, as Paul notes that “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up”. He explains further that “anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him”. The emphasis of both Mark and this Corinthians excerpt indicate that our call is to LIVE the message as opposed to claim and defend our understanding of it. When we consider our alliance to a church community, we ought to know what kind of authority is present. One local evangelical church asks members to “cheerfully submit themselves to the instruction and government of their church, and promise to promote its purity, peace and welfare by all means within their power”.

In contrast, the UCC website opens by saying “you are welcome here”. The North Prospect website describes itself as a “community of faith that seeks to respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed”. There is no trace of laying claim to authority over its congregants or to a false image of purity. Instead, we are a group of individual seekers who hope to live according to the directives of God as we understand their application today.

Though it is helpful to reaffirm an authority which leaves space for God’s ongoing message, we must go forward with the humility to know how frequently we miss the mark. It is so easy to gain authority in cases when one holds power over another.

Whether it’s in parenting, in a job, or at the Outdoor Church, we would do well to remember that authentic authority comes only through aligning our words with our deeds. Let us seek each day to be mindful of the temptation towards false authority and self inflating behavior. Allow these teachings from Mark and Paul to weave their way into our consciousness and daily life. Let us come together as a community to bear witness to an authority which works on the principles of love and acceptance rather than exclusion and admonishment of the other.

May God in Christ be the primary authority under which we each live, and may our authority with others be a source of growth and joy for them and each of us. We pray this in Christ’s holy name. Amen