

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Rediscover Jesus: With Authority”

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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. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.” 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. 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.

Mark 1:21-28

Last week we started this series in the Gospel of Mark we’re calling “Rediscover Jesus.” And something I want us to remember throughout it is that we should always consider that word “rediscover” to be in scare quotes, because just saying “rediscover” implies that everyone has already learned what we need to learn about this Jesus guy, and we just need reminding, when really that’s never the case. No matter where we may be in a life of faith, we are all in the same boat in one way, and it’s this: Jesus is never done showing us something new about who he is and what it means to follow him. There’s always something a bit surprising, and the second we think we’ve got this Jesus thing figured out, he challenges us to discover him again and again and again.

We’re looking at most of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Mark, just going bit by bit. Last week we looked at the beginning of his public ministry in Galilee and the calling of his first disciples by the Sea of Galilee: “Follow me,” he said, “and I will make you fish for people.” Then picking up right where we left off, we come to Jesus’s first public encounter—at least the first one that Mark tells us about—with the religious authorities of the day and with the forces of evil. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage.] This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

They tell you in preacher school that you should never get dependent on what you hear after a sermon. What that means is, if your sense of worth depends on the number of compliments you get from a sermon, you’re in the wrong line of work. Now I know some of you are thinking, “Jay, trust me. I don’t think you have to worry about getting too many compliments.” Just the other day, Frances told me that she got an alert on her watch about her heart rate during church on Sunday. I told her, “My preaching got your heart all a quiver again?” She said, “No, it was during an anthem.”

Quick note just to clarify. I don’t want any of you to be self-conscious about what you may feel led to share after the service or later in the week. Those are conversations I love having, that I want to have with you. What resonated with you. What convicted you. What did you agree with, or disagree with? I live for those conversations, so don’t hold back. What I mean by not being dependent on you hear after a sermon is more like, “If I don’t get x number of people saying ‘That was the best sermon I’ve ever heard in my life,’ then I’ll be in a

funk all week.” If preachers get to that point, they’re in trouble. It also leaves them/us susceptible to the time-honored tradition of the backhanded compliment. You don’t have to be a preacher to know what those are, but I remember one.

This was maybe five or six years back when I was in Germantown. I was an Associate Pastor and only preached every so often, so when I did, I really tried to make it count. (Obviously now that I preach more or less weekly, some weeks I just think, eh, whatever. That’s a joke.) But after I offered a sermon a few years back, I was greeting folks afterward as they left, and one person comes, someone who I knew to be a bit cantankerous himself, and he said, “You know, you preached with energy today.” Obviously my first thought was, “You mean as opposed to the others?” The person behind him heard him and when she came up, she joked, “Give a compliment, take it away.” We’ve all gotten those, those backhanded comments, that sound nice and complimentary but really there’s a cut underneath the smile. Ever hear them? “Wow, your Instagram makes you seem so fun,” “I love how you don’t care about the way you look,” or “You’re at the top of the bell curve.” That last one took me a minute to think about when I read it, but it might be my favorite.

And I think Mark drops one of those backhanded comments into this passage today. It might not even be so backhanded, more just direct, but it’s kind of funny, and it gets to something so important about who Jesus shows himself to be. After calling his first disciples, Jesus comes to a town called Capernaum, along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. On the sabbath day, he goes into the local synagogue, begins to teach, and has the first encounter (in Mark anyway) with the so-called scribes. So in this setting, when you hear synagogue, think something like a local church in a small town, and when you hear scribes, they were folks who got up, read Scripture, and taught about it, so when you hear “scribes,” think, someone like me.

Everyone in the church, I mean synagogue, is amazed, and the reason they’re amazed, Mark says—and this is where the backhanded comment comes in—is because “he taught them as one having authority, not as the [preachers, I mean] scribes.” First thought that comes to mind to me is, “As one who had authority,” as opposed to, well, the ones who do this every week? Honestly, I’m compelled to have at least some sympathy for them, because, I mean, I kind of do something similar. From their perspective, this guy comes in from out of town, comes into their church, blows the roof off the place, and then everyone immediately starts comparing them, and comparison is not favorable.

It’d be like next week, when Tom Tewell joins us. Tom is a good friend and mentor and a fantastic preacher, and I know we as a church will be edified by what he has to teach us from Scripture, and I hope that by the Spirit, God’s Word will resonate with each and every one of us—but I hope you don’t like him too much. These poor preachers, I mean scribes, just get no respect. This Jesus comes into town, and everyone is wowed. “He teaches with authority, not like these chumps who get up and talk at us every week.”

But as much as I might want to sympathize with them, Mark definitely doesn’t want us to. Jesus either. Apparently, it was common practice for scribes at the time to dive into lofty language and trivia about Scripture to make themselves sound smart and above everyone else, using their familiarity to lift themselves up and bring the congregation down. Jesus doesn’t really get into it with them at this point, but he will later on. He has more important things in front of him, and that’s because of what happens next. And it shows why these teachers really don’t hold a candle to who Jesus is and what he’s about.

While they’re all there in the synagogue, a man with an unclean spirit—some translations say “evil” spirit—cries 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.” This is first time that Jesus has confronted evil in public. You may be familiar with Jesus’s temptation in the desert, in which he was tempted by the devil for forty days in the wilderness. We talked about that earlier this year. That would have happened a bit before this, but that was, by all indications, kind of off the grid. This is the first time Jesus encounters evil as a part of his public ministry. So the question is, “How’s he gonna react?” It’s all well and good when it’s lofty language about the kingdom of God and good news. But what happens when there’s that first bit of resistance, and not just resistance, spiritual resistance? He rebukes him, not the man, but the evil spirit in him. Commands him to be silent and to come out of the man. The spirit causes the man to convulse and thrash around, but came out.

And again, everyone was amazed, and again they remark, “A new teaching—with authority!” They came back to this thing about authority. First from his teaching, they said, “Wow, he teaches with authority.” Then, from this exorcism, they said, “Wow, he commands—with authority!—and even the unclean spirits obey. One teacher put it this way: that the ancient world considered authority in terms of both one’s right to it and one’s power to demonstrate it. Usually one’s right to authority came by some version of a given title or an inherited crown. A king was a king because he was the son of the last king, and if someone took the throne, he was known as a usurper, and he usually had to do some work, often bloody work, to convince the kingdom of his legitimacy, his right, to the throne, to hold that authority. On the other hand, one’s power to demonstrate that authority was seen to go hand in hand, because even if you had the right to a certain kind of authority but not the power to demonstrate it, like a king with the right title and lineage but no command of an army to defend the kingdom, then of what use was the title or the crown in the first place? Like a bit from that show Game of Thrones, there’s a cruel, pouty king who starts shouting, insisting “I am the king!” and then was chided by his grandfather, “Anyone who has to say ‘I am the king!’ over and over is no true king.”

Now Jesus over the course of his life and ministry completely redefines what true authority is, that his authority, his right, his power doesn’t play by the same rules of conquest and treachery that the world does. And we see that on display here. He doesn’t need to assert his right, his title. This evil spirit is the one who rightly proclaims who is: “the Holy One of God.” Interesting tidbit, in the first half of Mark’s Gospel, the only ones who correctly proclaim Jesus’s identity as Messiah or Holy One or anything like that are either demons or outsiders. All the insiders keep getting it wrong. Here, it’s the spirit who actually proclaims who Jesus is, his title, his right, to this authority. But Jesus doesn’t put up a billboard. In fact, he kind of shirks from that spotlight at this point. He commands the spirit to be silent. He doesn’t need to make a display of his power either. He doesn’t waste any time. He doesn’t make a show of it. He commands the spirit to leave, and no matter how violently the spirit may thrash at first, he leaves.

The people are amazed, because they’ve never seen authority of this kind. The sort of authority they’re used to is the violence of empire, the hypocrisy of religion, the oppression of evil. And here comes this traveling teacher who without violence, without hypocrisy, without oppression, rebukes it all. Evil confronts him, and he commands it to be silent.

That’s something perhaps we forget about this Jesus. For many, Jesus can serve as something like a feel-good zen master, just can’t be rattled, always calm, everything’s just love and peace and rainbows and unicorns. Jesus is about love; Jesus is about peace, but we don’t have to think long to imagine just how quickly lofty, even naïve ideals of love and peace can shatter when confronted with the harshness of reality. So for some of us, that image of Jesus as this zen-like love and peace guru doesn’t hold much good news. It’s nice to think about, maybe, but not much use when it comes to the fray.

What Jesus shows here is that his ministry, his life, his work would not be about spewing trivia or dispensing platitudes about the kingdom of God or hawking fables about love and peace. He would teach, yes. He would proclaim the kingdom of God. He would preach and embody love and peace. But not just idle words. When confronted with evil, Jesus rebukes it, and it was silenced.

On one hand, that should be good news to us, because how empty would this kingdom of God that Jesus seems so eager to talk about, how empty would it seem if it didn't confront all that was twisted and corrupted about the one the world operates by? What authority, what legitimacy, would he actually have with you if all he did was speak in aphorisms without consequence? The answer is, not much. Why listen to someone whose words don't really matter? On one hand, this should be good news. On the other, this should be a challenge to anyone who claims to follow him. Last week, we talked about how Jesus calls his disciples to take part in his calling, to continue his work. So now with Jesus showing us that his work is about confronting and silencing evil, that his work is of grave consequence in the world, what should the work of those who follow him look like?

I think about that. I think about that every week. Am I only like those scribes, just offering trivia about Scripture, or with some vague platitudes about love and grace, an "opioid for the masses" as one cynic put it? Or in seeking to follow Jesus, do they, by the Spirit's work, compel us to stand against evil, as Jesus does, good news and a word of comfort to a weary world, but with that a proclamation that the Lord we serve will not abide evil to endure forever? I think about that.

Does your faith lead you to do the same? Or are we like the scribes, in that our faith leads to very little of consequence? Is it something we just keep around to make us feel nice? Or is it leading us to stand up, freeing those who are weighed down and confronting that which is evil, doing the very work that Jesus does? Because if we claim to follow Jesus, or if I seek to proclaim Jesus, and our faith does not lead us to something of consequence, to confront evil and rebuke it, then clearly something has been lost in translation from the Jesus who silences this evil spirit and casts him out to whatever it is we imagine Jesus to be today.

Over two centuries ago, a zealous missionary left England for the Indian subcontinent, name of William Carey. Like many Western missionaries at the time, his worldview had a tinge of colonialism about it, but he was intensely dedicated to the spread of the gospel in a land that, as far as he could see, had not heard it. But as he continued in ministry there, learning the language, translating Scripture, proclaiming the message and starting to baptize converts to the faith, he also noticed in society around him things that simply were not right. He saw widows forced to be burned with the bodies of their deceased husbands. He saw the killing of infant girls because of social preference for male children. He saw a refusal to educate young women in schools. And he learned quickly that his ministry proclaiming the gospel would be empty if not paired with ministry putting that gospel into action, confronting evil where he saw it.

He later wrote, "Christians are a body whose truest interest lies in the exultation of the Messiah's kingdom.... Let then everyone in his station consider himself as bound to act with all his might, and in every possible way for God."

It's scary to think about, that this Jesus might not be so easy to keep in a convenient box to make us feel good when we feel down, that this Jesus might lead us to stand for something. But the good news is that we would rest on his authority, not our own, and that by his right and power, the world will know that evil has been put on notice.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.