

Mark 1:21-39 ²¹ They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. ²³ Just then, there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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." ²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet and come out of him!" ²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷ They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸ And his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. ²⁹ As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. ³⁰ Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. ³¹ He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them. ³² That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed by demons. ³³ And the whole city was gathered around the door. ³⁴ And he cured many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons, and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him. ³⁵ In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ³⁶ And Simon and his companions hunted for him. ³⁷ When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." ³⁸ Jesus answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do." ³⁹ And he went throughout all Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Mark 1:21-39

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"What Have You To Do With Us?"

Rev. Amy Terhune

September 1999. I'm 25 years old. For the first time in my living memory, it's September and I'm NOT in school. No no. I'm 4 months out of seminary. 3 months married. 2 months under appointment by the bishop as the actual pastor of a church for the first time in my life. I'm an associate pastor, thank God, because you shouldn't have wanted to inflict me on some poor church without someone around who knew what they were doing. I have no idea what I'm doing. I have a heart full of love for God and neighbor, and a spirit full of energy and dreams and the optimism of youth. I've got a head full of knowledge from seminary – theological terminology and biblical exegesis and sociological paradigms. My head is full, but I have no idea how to actually take what's in my head and integrate into the practice of ministry. I don't know what I'm doing! Anyone can see that. I mean, heck, the furnace repairman comes into the church office, comments how nice it is to see young people in the church and asks if my dad is around. Which I wouldn't have been quite so sensitive about were it not for the fact that the week before, the nice little lady that sits in the third pew and smiles at me every Sunday told me on the way that I look so cute up there in my robes, like I'm playing dress-up or something. And it all strikes a nerve because I'm already struggling a little with imposters syndrome, wondering what happens when they figure out that I really don't know what I'm doing.

Which isn't a good feeling, especially when the mother of a 12-year-old boy marches into my office, tosses a book down on my desk, and huffs out, "my son wants to read that!"

I look at the book. Admittedly, I hadn't read it, but I'd heard of it—it topped the NYT bestseller list that summer. It was entitled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Being new to the whole pastoral thing, I wasn't entirely sure what the issue was, so I responded with a very brilliant, "Oh?"

“It’s about witches and wizards,” she informed me with a scowl, “and sorcery. It’s right there in the title!” And the Bible says that sorcery is of the devil! My husband thinks we should let him read it, but this seems like a *dangerous* thing to me. What if he reads it and decides to become a Satanist?”

At that point, I finally hopped on the clue bus, but I did not yet have the ability to articulate how sorcery is used in scripture to explain bad things that can’t otherwise be explained, or that when Paul condemns it, what he’s condemning is the chicanery and use of illusion to purposefully manipulate or exploit others for personal gain. He certainly wasn’t speaking of children’s literature. Nor did I have the wherewithal to explain that child psychologists suggest that ‘fantasy’ or ‘magic’ is essential for brain development, which is why it shows up in all the old fairy tales like Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, not to mention *Star Wars*, or things like *Lord of the Rings* or *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, both of which were written by Christian authors as parables of the Christian pilgrimage. The theory goes that children who can imagine a Quiddich field coming to life before their eyes, or a portal to another world at the back of an old wardrobe, are the same kids that grow up to be those who imagine us away from dependence on fossil fuels, imagine a cure for cancer, imagine solutions to international hostilities, and so on. We need imaginations. I dare say that when we lose our propensity to imagine, life stops moving forward.

Now, this mother back then wanted me to read Harry Potter because she believed I’d do better at identifying the subtleties of evil. “You’re trained in that stuff,” she told me. That was my first brush with ‘pastoral authority’. But of course, she didn’t really want me to read it and tell her what I thought, whatever that may be. What she wanted me to do was read it and back up what she already believed, so that she could then go home and tell her husband and her son that the pastor said ‘no’. She literally judged a book by its cover—she didn’t even read it!

The political pundits analyzing the presidential contest are saying the same thing, too. They have all commented at one point or another that most people, regardless of their ideological bent, are going to think what they want, find evidence, facts, or statistics to back up what they already believe. It’s human nature. And ultimately, that was true of the society in Jesus’ time. Those who saw Jesus as a threat found what they wanted in order to discredit him and eliminate him. And those who believed in him saw the power of love to transform hearts, lives, power, and even death. All of which proves false the age-old adage “seeing is believing!” Seeing is *not* believing; believing is seeing.

But in our scripture lesson this morning, we’re given a brief glimpse into a moment when Jesus so astounded people, so bewildered them with the unexpected, that everyone had to stop for a moment, rub their eyes, and say ‘whoa!’

Jesus is just embarking on his ministry that will eventually lead to his death and resurrection. He’s been baptized by John and spent 40 days being tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Now he’s returned to society, called disciples to follow, and is beginning to get the word out. It’s still early in his ministry, and people aren’t quite sure yet who this Jesus is or what he’s out to accomplish. He sets up his base camp in Capernaum (that’s Peter’s hometown) and goes up to the synagogue to teach. Mark doesn’t tell us what he’s saying, only that folks are thunderstruck by what they’re hearing. Then Jesus casts a demon out of a possessed man and heals Peter’s mother-in-law, and the already-flabbergasted congregation is completely awestruck. Word spreads. This Jesus is not like anyone who has come before. What is it that makes him so different?

Well, for one thing, he teaches on his own authority. “You may remember an old joke that the definition of a college lecture is the process whereby the information in the professor’s notes is transferred to the student’s notes without going through the minds of either! That’s not fair to a lot of good professors, but it is a fair description of how the scribes taught....” They lacked authority because they were not themselves really involved. The Scribes taught dogma, but did not really enter

into the situation. They gave textbook, stale answers. The hard, agonizing questions of life were referred to superficial solutions of the past, the pat approaches of a dry faith. [adapted from "A New Kind of Teaching" by Maurice A. Fetty, www.Sermons.com.]

Not so with Jesus. He used the Hebrew Scriptures to back up his arguments, to show how God was setting the stage, but his interpretation was utterly new. He called people, not to follow laws for the sake of being right, but for the sake of knowing God. He transferred the focus from holiness to the Holy One. This astonished the people, and it should astonish us, too. God was no longer in the past. God was in the present in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

"He took the risk, entered into the situation, moved beyond the outdated rigidities, and spoke to the present need with clarity, insight, and conviction. When he spoke, the people knew he was sincere, and not just mouthing the party line. He was not just a spectator-commentator observing the news. He was the news. [adapted significantly from "Astonishing!" by Brett Blair and Staff, www.Sermons.com.]

The authority of Jesus is rooted, then, in his identity—it is who he is! But it is communicated to us in his mission. "That man with an unclean spirit understands who Jesus is better than anyone else in the room. He is on the margins of society and the margins of sanity, but he knows exactly who Jesus is... and he wants to know, "What are you going to do with people like me? Are you going to destroy us?" ... Mark is making this point: that the will and purpose of God present in Jesus is engaging and fighting against the purposes of evil that exist among humanity. This battle is not fought just at the highest levels of government or industry, but right in the midst of common folk like us. The battle of good versus evil, right versus wrong, life versus death happens amidst the people who are gathered for worship. Christ has come to shatter the domineering designs that shackle people... [from Todd Weir, *What Will You Do with Us, Jesus?* in illustrations for Mark 1:21-28 on www.Sermons.com.]

You and I may well ask that same question. What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? The answer: Everything. John's gospel tells us that Jesus was sent to us, not to condemn or destroy, but to save. He came to have everything to do with us—to live our lives, to struggle our struggles, to suffer as we do, to know our disillusionment. He came to build a relationship. He came to do what the law could not—to lead our hearts back to God. His authority, then, is not only rooted in who he is, but in what he came to do.

"I love the story about a young second lieutenant at Fort Bragg who discovered that he had no change when he was about to buy a soft drink from a vending machine. He flagged down a passing enlisted man and asked him, "Do you have change for a dollar?" The private said cheerfully, "I think so, let me take a look." The lieutenant drew himself up stiffly and said, "Soldier, that is no way to address an officer. We'll start all over again. Do you have change for a dollar?" The private came to attention, saluted smartly, and said, "Sir! No, sir!" [from James W. Hewitt, *Illustrations Unlimited*, p. 42; for illustrations for Mark 1:21-28 on www.Sermons.com.]

That's not the way Jesus did things. His authority is not communicated by lording it over us, but by service. He teaches. He touches hearts and minds. He heals bodies and souls. He inspires dream and possibilities. They say that we do better if we take initiative rather than simply react to what comes at us. Jesus never reacted. He intentionally responded, taking the initiative to bless, to heal, to empower – to replace chaos with peace and despair with hope. What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Everything.

Jesus' authority is rooted in his identity and communicated in his mission. But even more, his authority can transform lives. "In our lesson this morning, "the people in the congregation, having witnessed a scene to rival anything in *The Exorcist*, look around at each other and say, "What is this? ... A new teaching!"

A new teaching? Tom Long offers this witty insight when he writes, “If this had happened in any congregation I know, they may have sat for hours in stupefied silence, they may have rushed to the altar in sudden repentance, or they may have run from the church in terror, but the last thing they would have done was to turn to one another and comment nonchalantly on how this casting out of a demon constituted an innovation in Christian education... [2 ¶s from “An Understated Masterpiece” by Thomas G. Long, www.Sermons.com]

But seriously—that’s too bad. Because any teacher can tell you that often, the best lessons are those that involve experience in addition to words and pictures. There’s a wonderful scene in the movie “Amazing Grace”, which came out back in the 90s, but it’s still a great flick about 18th century British statesman William Wilberforce and his 20-year campaign to outlaw slavery in the British Empire. He fought when many others gave up. Why? Because someone came to his house with the actual iron shackles that were used to bind slaves. They brought a box that was the size of holding cell so he could see just how cramped it really was. They took him to a ship and let him see the cells, smell the smells, investigate instruments of torture and abuse that one would not even use on animals. Those pictures don’t leave the mind, and they transformed him from a sympathizer to an activist.

That’s what Christ’s kind of teaching can do. In his penetrating book *The First Circle*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the famous Russian author who defected to America, makes an interesting observation about how the Russian authorities handled the church. He writes: “No one stops them from ringing their bells; they can break communion bread anyway they please. They can have their processions with the cross. But they will in no way allow them to have any connection with social or civic affairs.” The church was allowed to go through the motions; it could have a presence, but it dare not have an influence.” [from illustrations for Mark 1:21-28 on www.Sermons.com.] Christ’s teaching influences, transforms, changes, and makes new.

“Perhaps you’ve heard the story about the bride who was extremely nervous on her wedding day? She confided to her minister that she was not sure she could make it all the way down the aisle without shaking or crying. So the minister, a seasoned veteran of weddings, gave her a bit of advice.

“When you begin your walk,” he said, “just remember this three-point formula: First, look straight down the aisle; second, when you get about half-way, look straight at the altar; and third, when you get near the front, look straight at your groom. Then you won’t be as nervous.”

“The trembling bride agreed to try this. And it worked beautifully. She walked with a radiant glow on her face and poise and confidence in her step. However, there was one small problem. Imagine the surprise of the congregation as they heard her rhythmically repeating three words over and over as made her way to the chancel, “Aisle...altar...him!”

“Aisle...altar...him!” Well, the truth is, most spouses don’t have a lot of luck in altering their partner, and in fact, when partners enter marriage thinking they’ll alter one another once their married, the marriage is often in trouble quickly. But the good news of the Christian faith is that God can alter us! [3 ¶s adapted slightly here from James W. Moore, *Some Things Are to Good Not To Be True*, p. 48; from illustrations for Mark 1:21-28 on www.Sermons.com.]

What clinches the authority of Christ in my life is the power he has had, time and time again, to transform me—to renew my sense of call, to revitalize my prayer life, to reenergize my spirit, to soften my heart, to deepen my mind, to challenge my assumptions, to broaden my vision, to inspire my service, to make me a new creation every morning through the transformative power of his love. It is this very power that makes him Lord of my life—the one I turn to before all others as the authoritative Word for living. What have you to do with me, Jesus of Nazareth? Everything. Thanks be to God, absolutely everything! Amen.