

“A New Teaching – With Authority!”  
Rev. Eric. S. Corbin  
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois  
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[Mark 1:21-28](#)

They showed up for church that day, expecting the usual. They would sing, they'd have some responsive readings, the choir would sing, the pastor would preach, they'd go home. OK, maybe that wasn't the typical pattern of worship for those gathered in the synagogue that day when Jesus showed up, but they did have a normal pattern. Jewish males were allowed to teach in the synagogue by asking permission of the president of the synagogue, so many different teachers were heard from week to week. Jesus showed up one day and asked to teach, and they decided to hear from this new guy. They didn't expect anything new or exciting, though. After all, they had heard that this guy was from Nazareth, and everyone knows nothing good ever came out of Nazareth. So, they relaxed into their seats, maybe thinking about what they had for breakfast, what they would be having for lunch, the stresses of their job, the joy of their child's smile, the blessings God had given them. They thought about the same kind of things we think about when we gather here, and they settled in for yet another time of worship. Some were there because they were expected to be there. Some were there out of pure habit. Some were there because they needed both to be seen by others and to see others. Some were there for true worship. Kind of like us, who are gathered here for a variety of reasons. Yes, they were all gathered for worship that day, whatever brought them all together. But probably none were expecting the shock that they got that day. And the shock actually starts earlier in the text than we might think. We might want to focus on the guy who disrupted worship that day, the one who Mark tells us had “an unclean spirit.” The heading in the pew Bible draws our attention there by titling this section “The

Man with an Unclean Spirit.” At first glance, that does seem to be the big news of the day, but I think if we look closer, we’ll see something else. Now, Jesus commanding the unclean spirit is a big deal, and we’ll talk about that in a bit, but I want us to focus on something else first.

I think the second verse we read today has the clue to understanding this particular passage. Mark tells us that the people in the synagogue that day – those folks gathered for just another day at the synagogue – “were astounded at [Jesus’] teaching.” This was not the same old, same old. There was something different about Jesus’ teaching, as opposed to all the other teachers they had heard. What was it? Mark goes on: “he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Richard Jensen, a professor of homiletics, says this: “Scribal authority was based on their ability to recite the opinion of many Rabbis on a given topic.”<sup>1</sup> You see, the scribes were like preachers such as the one standing before you now. We quote from others in our teachings and sermons, as I did just then! We give you our thoughts, but also the thoughts of others. Perhaps my words don’t have enough weight behind them, so I quote from others whose words add to the message. But Jesus didn’t do that. They were, in Mark’s words, “astounded” at the way Jesus taught, not as the scribes did, not by quoting from others on a given topic, not by just reinforcing the words of others who had gone before, but Jesus taught “as one having authority.” Jesus’ words had authority, all on their own, as this was the first big shock of the day! The people gathered for worship that day weren’t expecting someone to come in and teach *with authority*. They expected the usual teaching style. How could they know that someone would arrive who would show them what authority was like? They could tell that Jesus wasn’t like the scribes. They could tell that Jesus’ words had authority, because Jesus *was* the authority.

Authority – what does that really mean? The word authority comes from the same root as the word author. Author, authority. These words indicate someone who creates. The first

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<sup>1</sup>Preaching Mark’s Gospel: A Narrative Approach, page 48.

chapter of the gospel of John tells us that it was through the eternal Word that everything was created. The people gathered that day got to hear that same Word spoken, directly from the lips of Jesus. They heard the authority in what Jesus said. It was obvious to them, and they were astounded.

They weren't the only ones, though. It seems there was to be an interruption in Jesus' teaching that day in the synagogue. While the people were being astounded at the authority with which Jesus spoke, Mark tells us there was a man in the synagogue with an unclean spirit. And the spirit, too, recognizes the authority of Jesus. The spirit actually goes further than the people gathered. They were astounded by the teachings of Jesus and they recognized Jesus' authority, but it was the unclean spirit who knew exactly who Jesus was. It was the unclean spirit who cried out "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." The people gathered had an idea that Jesus was special, but it was the unclean spirit who told them all who He was. *The Holy One of God*. And the spirit was, understandably, afraid. "What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?" The spirit knew who Jesus was and knew the authority Jesus had, and so it was afraid. And Jesus used his authority to command the spirit to come out of the man, and it did. Mark's narration of the event includes perhaps the understatement of the year: "they were all amazed." Really? I can't imagine why!

Now the people have gotten much more than they bargained for when they came to worship that day. First, they hear from a new teacher, one who speaks with authority. Then, they find out from an unclean spirit that this new teacher is *the Holy One of God*. And, of course, there's the whole matter of the person with the unclean spirit, yelling out in the middle of the service. And the spirit obeys Jesus when He tells it to come out of the man. What a day at the synagogue! But it really gets interesting next. After all that the people have witnessed that day, what do you think they would do? Or, what would we do? If we were witness to an unclean spirit convulsing

around in someone and yelling out and then Jesus casting out that spirit, how would we react? Maybe some of us would sit here with our chins on the floor. Maybe some would rush to the altar in repentance. Maybe some would rush out the doors in terror. But the folks gathered that day? They commented further about Jesus' authority. They said "What is this? A new teaching--with authority!" After what they've witnessed, what they comment on most is the teaching of Jesus, and how Jesus taught with authority. I think this gives us a clue as to the lesson we are to take from this passage.

The people gathered that day saw the authority of Jesus, and even the unclean spirit obeyed His words. So, how about us? Most of us probably came to church like those gathered at that synagogue so many years ago. People attend church for many reasons: out of habit, or to see and be seen, or because they think they're *supposed* to be here, or to truly worship. We've gathered here...are we just going through the motions, not expecting Jesus to really show up? Jesus told us that where two or three are gathered, He will be there, so He's here and He has words of authority for all of us to hear. He has words like "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." He has words like "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He has words for us like "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" and "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And He has words for us like "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Jesus has many words for us to hear, but even more importantly, *to follow*. If we only hear the words of Jesus, they don't do anyone much good. If we hear the words of Jesus *and act on them*, then Jesus' words of authority can change the world. The authority of Jesus is not like the authority of a boss or a military superior. There is no threat behind the words of Jesus, only love. Yes, Jesus is speaking to each of us, and He is speaking with authority. Will we listen? Amen