

# With Authority

Scripture Reading: Mark 1: 21-28

Mark tells us this morning that from the beginning Jesus taught as one having authority. That's a far piece different from being someone who was only too happy to voice an opinion.

One summer day when we were kids, my brother and I watched a big league baseball game on television. I might've been in eighth grade and Robert in fifth. The game was slow as molasses. I blamed one team's pitcher. He took forever on the mound.

That night at dinner, I brought this up. "They should put a time limit on pitchers. If they don't pitch within, say two minutes, then the batter walks. If they did that, the fans' satisfaction would rise exponentially." I probably didn't say "exponentially" but you get my drift.

My brother put down his fork, looked across the table and said in his best big boy voice, "That's ridiculous! You don't know the first thing about baseball!" "You don't need to know anything to have an opinion," I countered quickly, realizing immediately that my comeback applied to many things, not just baseball.

That observation, that you don't need to know anything to have an opinion, becomes especially obvious during election season, doesn't it? Candidates, commentators, and citizens all are convinced of things and yet it's hard to know sometimes who's on target, who's putting a big spin on the truth, and who's just plain misinformed.

Watching the President's State of the Union address the other night online, I found it interesting that right next to the live feed of the speech was a box marked "Fact Check." If something the President said sounded like a half-truth or a flat-out falsehood, all a viewer had to do was type a question in that box and someone in cyber space would confirm that claim. Or not.

The President and those hoping to become the next President all speak with authority. But authority and truth do not always travel together. As George Miller reminded our Tuesday Bible study group this week, a certain German dictator spoke with tremendous authority, indeed he possessed great authority, and yet his claims about the superiority of one race over another were patently false.

Authority is an interesting animal. There's authority that's conferred. Law enforcement officers have this kind of authority. So do doctors who undergo the rigors of study, residencies, and board exams. Or teachers whose credentials qualify them to educate our youngsters.

That's one kind of authority. And then there's the kind of authority that rises up within a person. Sometimes, as with Hitler, it comes from a place of brokenness and need. But other times, it comes from a purer place, a God-given source.

Every year when the church annual meeting rolls around, I think of Russell Fey, an active member in the church I grew up in. Russ had the healthy kind of inner authority. It wasn't something he conjured up by sheer force of will; instead, it was something God blessed him with for the greater good.

Russ had a gentle but firm way of pointing us toward the truth whenever we lost our way or were caught in a decision-making stalemate. Russ never rushed to speak. Instead, he would wait on the Spirit, rise at just the right time, say a few words, and then he would sit back down.

After Russ spoke, a hush would go over the sanctuary as we each took in what he had said. I can still hear the sound that followed. Plink, plink, plink. This was the sound of a light going in inside each of us. You could hear it happen. You could see it, too. What had not been clear before, what had been confusing or conflicted was now, quite plainly, and without struggle, evident. Russ had a gift for quietly pointing us in God's direction.

Russ Fey had the kind of authority that wasn't conferred by others or was the result of brokenness. His was an authority much like the kind Jesus had in spades from the very beginning of his ministry.

One day, not long after he had recruited disciples, Jesus wandered into the synagogue in Capernaum and taught. Plink. Plink. Plink. Lights went on inside people like you can't imagine. Plink. Plink. Plink. Jesus didn't persuade. He didn't offer up a new opinion. He didn't shame people or argue them into abandoning their sinful ways.

Jesus simply taught the truth with a kind of authority that made people lean in to catch every word. He offered up truth that, once heard, stirred something that was lying dormant inside his listeners.

Fr. Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest who writes and lectures prolifically, says that when this happens, when we are enlivened by a new teaching and claim it as our own, the credit goes not to the teacher, really, but to the Holy Spirit.

When we're moved or helped by something someone is telling us or teaching us, to borrow from one of the psalms, deep is speaking to deep.

Remembering that the Latin word for education comes from "educare," meaning to draw knowledge forth or out, it's fair to say that Jesus wasn't trying to insert new ideas into people understanding so much as he was—with the Spirit's help—awakening truths that had been there all along, sitting dormant in people's hearts and minds.

Word spread quickly about Jesus' new teaching with authority. That's not surprising.

But what's interesting is that later, when people told the story of what happened that day in the synagogue, no one bothered to report what Jesus had said. That's not what was mattered. What was important, what was held dear, was how Jesus had said what he said. With authority, not as the scribes.

Now if you and I could travel back in time to poll people an hour before Jesus showed up that day, if we got to them before Jesus began teaching, I greatly suspect those folks would have had nothing but praise for the scribes.

On a scale of one to ten, people would've easily have given the scribes all eights and nines. Nobody's perfect, they might say. But these fellows have studied hard, they know their stuff, and we appreciate the chance to learn from them.

But all that changes when Jesus comes forward and teaches. To hear him talk is like going from a black and white movie to color, from a silent film to a talkie.

Jesus' understanding of scripture and tradition is like nothing anyone has heard before—it is crystal clear, shimmering with life and invitation. Deep speaks to deep. And all of a sudden, what those earnest and faithful scribes have been teaching for year after year now seems flat and predictable and not terribly compelling.

What Jesus teaches shimmers and enlivens. It also threatens. Mark's gospel tells us that as soon as Jesus finishes teaching, a man with an unclean spirit cries out. "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Possessed with an unclean spirit, the man simply cannot tolerate the truth in Jesus' teachings. It's like fingernails on the chalkboard of his mind. It's like a searing poker to his soul. It's shocking, painful, and very threatening.

Truth spoken with authority can have that effect on us. It can stir up and threaten the spirits that have taken possession of us—and there are so many kinds. Anger. Pride. Fear. Addiction. Prejudice. Certitude. Things that are obstacles to the Holy Spirit's movement within us.

Later in his ministry, Jesus will tell us that his truth will set us free. (John 8: 32). Sometimes that freedom comes rapidly, as it does today when Jesus casts out the lie that has taken hold of this beloved child of God.

But other times, this freedom comes bit by bit, as God's spirit works quietly and persistently to release us from the bondage of something that has been cheating us and those around us of life in full.

Jesus taught as one with authority. What he said and how he said it struck chords of recognition within those who heard him. He enabled people to see and hear and trust what they already knew but didn't know they knew. He educated people—that is, he drew out what was hidden within them, so that they might be able to live freer, fuller, more faithful lives.

And yet, to borrow from St. Francis of Assisi, Jesus didn't always teach with words. His whole way of being was his teaching. You've met and been moved by those people before, I know. People like that have tremendous authority and yet paradoxically no need to push. They allow. They allow people to come to truth in their own way, on their own schedule.

That's part of the appeal of teachers who teach in the manner of Jesus. And that's part of the agony, too, for those who would rather be told what to think, do, or be.

Last November, I was at my home church on Sunday and had the pleasure of meeting my mother's new minister, who has the most perfect name for a pastor I've yet to hear: Christopher Breedlove. Like me, Chris has begun his ministry after serving for four-some years in the Indiana Kentucky Conference. And like me, during those years in the Ohio River Valley, he regularly heard his flock make this plea: Just tell us what to do. Just tell us what to do.

Every time I heard that, I told Pastor Chris, I grew more convinced that God has always meant for me to be a Congregationalist. His eyes twinkled when I said that and I could see how eager he was to step down off the authority pedestal that had been unwittingly fashioned for him back in Indiana.

When we gather in the next hour, we'll be living out our identity as Congregationalists. My shorthand way of explaining this to people unfamiliar with our polity is this: the power resides in the pews. Or, to borrow from Jesus today: the authority resides in the pews.

We'll be doing in the next hour what Jesus did throughout his life: listening for the Spirit's wisdom, so that we might, with appropriate authority, share with one another what the Spirit is saying, what it's trying to teach us.

And like Jesus, we can trust that deep will speak to deep, that the truth we are moved to share will be self-evident and enlivening and lead us into freer, fuller, more faithful life together.

That's the beauty of the way Jesus moved in the world. He trusted the Spirit to be at work in him, through him, and around him. And that's the beauty of this church. We do, too.

Amen.