

Reverend Robin Sherman
February 1, 2009

Do you have a favourite teacher? Can you remember a teacher that inspired you to continue with your studies, or helped you to get through school, or who inspired you to become a teacher yourself? Teachers are amazing people...well the good ones anyway. Just as we can remember that most wonderful of teachers we also can remember the worst teacher we had.

The gospel of Mark is the one gospel that really shows Jesus as teacher. Here it is right at the beginning of the book, chapter 1 verses 21 and 22; "he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught as one with authority, not as the scribes." But as much as the author of the book of Mark tells us that Jesus was a teacher over and over again, he doesn't tell us much about what he taught. The book of Mark tells us that Jesus preached but gives us only bits of his sermons.

I think it would be fair to say that the author of Mark saw Jesus as his favourite teacher.

All we really know about the teaching that Jesus did that day in Capernaum is that the people were astounded by it for he taught them as one having authority. It's kind of interesting that we are not told about what it is he said but rather what the people thought about him. It might be more useful to hear about the content of his preaching to give us a better idea of what he believed or where he is headed but at first glance in this reading we get nothing.

But of course the story doesn't stop here, what happens next is the other thing that makes Jesus, as teacher, the one with authority. Jesus is confronted by a possessed man. A man with an unclean spirit cries out in the synagogue, "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." Many of you are probably aware that to be someone with an unclean spirit in Jesus time could mean a number of different things from having a skin rash to mental illness. The crazy ones in the town.

And here we are at the meat and potatoes of our scripture reading today. The church's crazy people and guess what, we have a number of them. You know the ones I mean. Those crazy people who disrupt everything; we may even meet a couple of them today during our annual meeting. They're the ones who come in with their questions right in the middle of our nice smooth sailing agendas and sermons. They're the ones that everyone else rolls their eyes at, "Oh great, there goes Gladys again! Why does that old fool come here just for our meetings, he never comes to church otherwise!" You know the people I mean. We try to pay them little heed in the hopes that they will remain quiet and go away. They really just want to cause trouble.

In the book of Mark, the gospel writer uses these crazy people over and over again to proclaim Jesus as the son of God. Can we trust their proclamations? Are they the ones

to be trusted? In the weeks to come as we look at the book of Mark we will see it time and again. While we are moving through the book of Mark we will make our decisions about Jesus based not on the content of his sermons but rather on how he shows his authority. How he lives his life with authority.

Remember when I asked you to think of your favourite teacher? Chances are you don't remember any one thing that they said or did that endeared you to them but rather it was their entire being. There was just something about them that you connected with, everything about the way they moved in the world. Sure there may be some statements they made, words of wisdom; one particular conversation; but overall it was the way they carried themselves, lived their lives. It was the space they held in the world.

The writer of Mark wants us to realize that Jesus doesn't just bring us some interesting thoughts, or religious ideals to be upheld; Jesus was much more than that, he lived among us, he took up space and brought us the closest look at God that was possible. Today, we carve out the space that Jesus no longer physically takes up. It is the role of the church to live among the community, to carve out that space and to bring God closer to ourselves.

In many ways we do this, but sometimes we get caught up with the crazy people who shout out in the middle of our services and meetings and gatherings. People who ask the tough questions, "What have you to do with us?" "Have you come to destroy us?" Jesus and now the church, who has taken his place, have to be willing to face the challenges and the powers that would like to see the church fail, head on. Jesus asks us to face injustice, poverty, abuse, and countless other demons face to face. We are not just supposed to speak with authority but also act with authority; not to overthrow or control but to show compassion and love and justice to all; even to, and maybe even particularly to, those who question this authority.

But most of all the authority of Jesus speaks inclusion rather than exclusion. This authority includes persons who had been excluded in the past. Jesus included tax collectors and sinners, poor widows and prostitutes, little children and those possessed by demons as models of faith. We should be suspicious of religious authority which moves toward exclusion, those whose agenda is to keep certain people out by written rule or daily practice. According to Jesus' authority we should, in fact, we must, judge ourselves and our churches by our move toward inclusion. Where do we fit on the inclusion scale?

Do we value persons over rules or traditions as Jesus authority did? We see and hear this person-centered morality continually in the stories of Jesus. Remember Jesus argues with the religious leaders over the Sabbath laws and other written traditions. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to save life or to kill?" At another point, Jesus turned to the leaders and said, "You are making void the word of God through your tradition."

But doesn't Jesus sound just a bit like our possessed man in the synagogue today? Questioning the authority of those in power? Isn't it true that in our longing for greater

certainty and clearer religious authority, it is often persons who suffer? This is the difference between the authority of Jesus which comes from God and the authorities that make the rules by which our churches are governed and lead. Jesus authority always falls on what is best for people. It is not what will save the most money, or look the best to the community, or place us in the best social position, it is about what is best for us crazy people who gather in churches on Sundays and ask the eye rolling questions.

The people of Jesus time were astonished by his teaching, “what is this? A new teaching – with authority”, they said in amazement and still today we come to worship with the hope of being astonished.

Reverend Robin Shermon
February 1, 2009