

"AS ONE WITH AUTHORITY"

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Jesus is freshly minted in his new ministry. After his baptism and calling the twelve, he begins his preaching in the Capernaum synagogue. His hearers size him up. Is Jesus the real deal? Or is he one more wagging tongue? Some things will never change. And general skepticism about religious leaders is one of them.

“They were astounded at his teaching,” Mark records, “because he taught them as one with authority.” That means Jesus wasn’t talking to hear his own voice. He stepped out, took risks and colored outside the lines. Maybe most important, they recognized the passion in Jesus’ message, expressed in simple and direct terms, was God’s passion for all of us: an unrelenting love that will not let us go.

So what happens at Jesus’ first sermon? It sounds a bit like my own first sermon, frankly. I was a student chaplain at Wallingford’s Masonic Home. We wheeled a portable altar with a cross and a tiny pulpit down the hall into the day room where they did puzzles. And the nurses wheeled in and dropped off the most disabled persons at the Masonic Home, then returned to their station. A lady screamed through my entire sermon. And the nurses’ empathy was so finely tuned that they could distinguish acute suffering from the mild malaise of hearing a bad sermon. What I mean by that is, despite her screaming, no nurse came to wheel her out.

It was just as lively in the synagogue at Jesus’ first sermon. But the disturbance was more dire. For this was the shouting of a tormented, demon-possessed man. Mark reports Jesus doesn’t flinch. He doesn’t explain it away. He doesn’t turn away. He doesn’t ignore it. Jesus enters the man’s misery and torment. He rebukes his demon—who quickly recognizes Jesus as divine—and heals the man. They were all amazed. “Who is this? And what kind of teaching, that heals?” Again in this short reading, they note Jesus’ authority, that he the real deal. For this healing makes it eminently clear how little room God has for evil in this world.

It’s curious that how we evaluate religious leaders hasn’t changed in 2,000 years. Frankly, it will always be a version of “walking the walk while also talking the talk.” People naturally and instinctively assess us for some congruence between word and deed. When the two don’t match people write off pastors pretty quickly. And that cuts both ways. What that means is, yes, you have to practice what you preach, to use the popular term. But you also have to preach what you practice. When people of faith get both of these aligned, our message begins to resonate. That is precisely the story of what unfolded from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Today as we approach the table, as we hold the sacred emblems in our hands, we remember this is not only true of how people assess my authority as your pastor. It is not only true of how people decide whether Jesus is the Son of God.

It is also true of how people decide whether we are truly the body of Christ or not. Our authority as a people is no less at stake than mine or Jesus as faith leaders.

Would you like to hear candid impressions? Somehow you must sense you are going to hear them anyway. And do you know what? If I can manage to be gentle but firm as I speak the truth in love, maybe you'll do the same for me. Because—guess what—we are all accountable before God in this thing we call life. When people at large sniff out hypocrisy and search out real spiritual authority, the first measure is always: do they practice what they preach? We hear this all of the time. Some people say it reflexively, without even knowing what it means.

Frankly, you stack up well like this. Your lives teem with healing, merciful works. The fruits of your faith are evident. You enjoy this, near or far. You seek to make a difference at school, work, or at large, especially modeling it for your young. You don't care whom you partner with as you are kind, linking up with all types of organizations--often taking lead roles--so long as the others share your passion. You're involved and committed to reconciling in a way that must make our Congregational forebears proud. For you, as for them, all of the world is your church.

I might deduct style points for working so hard and long in your jobs that the Outreach Committee and I can't recruit you into work parties to do this in community rather than individually. But I quibble here, for your compassion is evident.

What about the other side of the ledger? How well do you preach what you practice? What that means is, how willing are you to let others know that God's love is what motivates you to step out in love. The answer here is you're mostly unaware how essential this is. Or you fear it because of how smarmy Christians do it.

This is so essential because in a world as selfish ours, in a world where everyone looks out for number one, as soon as you engage in self-disinterested generosity toward the hurting, people will wonder why. What motivates you? Who sent you? Under what flag does your compassion fly? In fact, it is the best part of empathic outreach, pointing beyond ourselves and to what the true and living God is up to.

In our gospel text, beyond the peace and serenity that one tormented man came to know, even greater still is the realization of that whole congregation watching Jesus, that God is in charge despite all of the countervailing evidence; that the down and out are not forgotten in God's greater scheme of things; that truth and grace and peace and wholeness have the final word, not brokenness and suffering. Of course, we know that is true not because of our best efforts. Not because we're going to save the world. Not because we are such swell individuals.

All of that is true only because God's ancient promises are fulfilled in Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and the coming of the kingdom of God. And if we're not clearheaded enough to say that, the message we send is that the world will be saved by good people like us. I do not believe that for a minute.

I've observed that when parents of our congregation do mercy with your children in Christlike ways, we hesitate to point back to Jesus. We say we do it because it makes us feel good: by giving to others we get more than we give. We say we do this because it's who we are: our parents and grandparents before us did likewise.

These are important things to say. But they're not the essential thing to say. The essential thing to say is we come in Jesus' name; we desire to see his face in the faces of those we serve; we cannot follow Jesus' and not love our neighbor. For the fact is if we do not give God the glory, we end up soaking it up for ourselves, even if we say nothing. Or we focus on the wrong things, like the productivity and efficiency of delivering help, instead of our human hearts meeting in Jesus Christ.

I have observed this same phenomenon in our mission work trips with youth and adults beyond Darien. "We don't need all of that God talk." Some treat the interpretation and rooting of what we are doing in the gospel as idle blah, blah, blah. "Stop bothering me with all of that," some say No, Ill not stop, by the way. I say at the start of all work trips we're not an expedition of do-gooders, we're followers of Christ on spiritual journey. With this background today, you know what I mean.

Preaching what we practice means refusing to leave God out of the loop in acts of mercy. We refuse because we God is the source and destiny for all goodness, and we are but his instruments. If we leave God out of this loop, we create godless children who imagine goodness comes naturally, and not from our God.

Let me ask you: do you want your good works to be a cut flower, shining one day only to wither the next? Or do you want your empathic kindness toward strangers to be a tender shoot that grows into a might oak, for later generations to behold?

Let's recap briefly. In seven short verses, the people of Capernaum are amazed at how authority rings out in everything Jesus says and does. And people do not impress easily in matters of spirit. Jesus has impact because he practices what he preaches. That is, he embodies his message of mercy and grace in healing acts. Jesus impresses because he preaches what he practices. He says these are not random acts of kindness but indeed signs of God's concerted movement. He points beyond himself to how God has not forgotten but will vindicate his own.

Both are required for the message of our church to resonate in ways that pull others into our momentum and catch them up in the God movement. We recall all of this now as we approach this table, where holy word and deed fuse as one. Amen.