

A New Authority, A New Freedom
Mark 1:21-28
Colebrook Congregational Church
February 1, 2015

Over the last few weeks, we have been hearing about a lot about Jesus from the point of view of Mark's Gospel. This week's selection immediately follows the passages from last week, and it illustrates two of the main concerns of Mark: That Jesus has an authority, unrelated to the accepted and traditional sources of authority, a new authority, directly from God; and also that Jesus hid his true nature, keeping it even from the disciples, until the crucifixion, where it became obvious to all that Jesus is the Son of God.

This week's passage starts off with Jesus and the disciples in Capernaum; and on the Sabbath, Jesus entered the synagogue and started teaching. He did this with authority, and people stopped what they were doing and listened to him, and were amazed by him and this authority he possessed. He wasn't one of the scribes or rabbis that they were familiar with there. He was new. What he was saying was new and different from what they were used to hearing at the synagogue.

Synagogues developed over time and their functions developed as well. In Ancient Israel, from the Exodus up to the reign of King David, there was not a Temple in Jerusalem. Instead, there was a Tabernacle, a temple-like complex made up of a series tents and cloth partitions...nice tents and partitions, it was a complex that housed the Ark of the Covenant, upon which God would sit. But still, God's House, the Holy of Holies, was a complex that could be packed up and moved fairly quickly, the use of which started during their time in the Wilderness. And this was on purpose. It reminded the Israelites of their time in the Wilderness, and it continued to be moved around, being hosted for a month by each of the Twelve Tribes in turn. Another purpose of this is that it allowed each Tribe to host and be in the presence of God, and to offer burnt offerings to God. Part of the uniqueness of the Israelites' monotheism is that burnt offerings to God can only be burnt where they know where God is. Therefore, they could only offer the offerings at the Tabernacle during the month their tribe hosted it.

Synagogues are believed to have started as a faith-based community center and school that filled the religious void during the eleven months when the Tabernacle was away, and then after King Solomon built the first temple, year-round. Once the area was conquered by the Babylonians, who dispersed the population throughout their empire, the synagogues became much more important. The Israelites were cut off from God's House and synagogues helped them in the Diaspora retain their identities & unique community, continue the study of the Torah, and provide a place of learning and a gathering place. There were very disorganized...as in, each was different, and they met the articular needs of the community, and there wasn't just one rabbi there, there were many, and students, and scribes, and anyone can could get up and speak. That's how Jesus was able to just walk in and start teaching people.

We do not know for certain what he said in this instance, but we can make some guesses. Jesus was pretty consistent with his message, we all know it and have heard it. And the people there were amazed by someone who wasn't one of the traditionally trained rabbis who taught the same old things in the traditional way. They felt the authority coming from Jesus as he taught, they recognized that something was different, that something had changed.

With changes, especially big ones, like how the coming of Jesus changed the relationship between God and Humanity, comes a time of transition, where new ideas, like Jesus' teachings, are able to come out into the open and be heard and acted upon. Others before Jesus, prophets and teachers and ascetics, undoubtedly have said similar things as Jesus, but they did not have quite the authority that Jesus had. It was this authority of Jesus, in that time of transitioning, that allowed his new ideas and teachings to influence and be spread throughout the world.

Transitions can be because of a good or a bad change. Being a hospital chaplain meant that I saw a lot of people on some of the worst days of their lives, which was transitioning in heartbreaking and life-changing ways. Most of those need time and support. Some cases had a more positive outcome, thankfully. One night, I was called to the Emergency Department to talk to a

young woman who had attempted to force her own transition. She was refusing to drink the charcoal solution, and I was asked to convince her to drink it, and given an amount of time before they would have to force a tube into her. We talked, and she was living a life filled with all types of abuse, but was kept so isolated, that she did not know about groups that offer shelters and safe havens for people like her. I listened to her story, I made a record for the authorities, I showed her the pamphlets, and got one of them on the phone with her. By then, and just in time, she started to drink the charcoal. When she was discharged, she was picked up and brought to a shelter to start her new life, freed from the past.

Transitions coming from a positive place can still challenge us to do somethings new or different, to even face the uncomfortable. At the start of my second tour in AmeriCorps, I had to decide what I was going to do for after-school programs. For my first tour, I took the easy way and decided to just stay at the school I was stationed at and help out in the various programming and homework help. I was about to do the same for the second tour. There is something comforting in going the way well-traveled, the safe track, just doing what was done before. It is understandable. It is less risky. But then the local Director pulled me aside and suggested that I try to do something else. My first reaction was to resist this, I did not want to take the risk, I was afraid of failure, and I didn't know what to do with such freedom. I meditated and considered my options and considered what I would be willing to do. I started to explore some things, and found myself at the Boys and Girls Club of Worcester teaching photography, and loving every moment of it. I never would have done something like that without that little push and the freedom to change and do other things that a period of transitions allowed to happen.

Transitions are a good time for new things to come about. New ideas, new ways, and new directions. It is a good time for assessing and reflecting upon what has passed before, and what will come to pass. It is a good time to change things up. And as we embark now on our time of transition, we should consider where we want to go, and how we want to go there. If you have any ideas, now is the time to share them. If you think of anything you want to see done, now is the time to suggest them. If you want to see any

changes made, now is the time to speak up.

Pastoral Prayer

[PAUSE]

We praise your abiding guidance, O God, for you sent us Jesus, our Teacher and Messiah, to model for us the way of love for the whole universe. We offer these prayers of love on behalf of ourselves and our neighbors, on behalf of your creation and our fellow creatures. We pray for your further guidance in the decisions we make every day, both big and small.

God of mercy and healing, you who hear the cries of those in need, receive these petitions of your people that all who are troubled may know peace, comfort, and courage. We pray for:

Loving God, open our ears to hear your word and draw us closer to you, that the whole world may be one with you as you are one with us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Offertory

O God, we offer these gifts to be used to benefit your church and our mission throughout the world. Bless the giver and those who cannot give. Grant us the wisdom to use these gifts in the manner you want us do. Amen.