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Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

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Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verses 21-28.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

One Sabbath day Jesus was teaching at the synagogue at Capernaum, we're told by the gospel this morning. The people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. That's an interesting phrase -- "as one who had authority." Where does authority come from? If you've ever been in the military or in a highly-structured business environment you know where it comes from; it comes from the rank or position in a hierarchy.

James Fixx published a book of games which he called *More Games for the Super Intelligent*. In that collection he offers this wonderful challenging puzzle from a military setting. You are a captain in charge of one sergeant and four men. Your task is to raise a hundred-foot flagpole and slide it into a hole that's ten-feet deep. You have two ropes -- one twenty-two feet long and one twenty-six feet long, two shovels and two buckets -- how do you accomplish your task? The answer is this: Since you're a captain, you turn to the sergeant and say, "Sergeant, get the flagpole up." That's positional authority -- you command those under you, and they obey.

My friend Jerry, a young Marine...his fingers were crushed in an accident. They were swollen and immobile for a few days and as the swelling went down the doctor ran some tests to measure the extent of his injuries. The doctor said, "Try to move the first finger of your right hand." Jerry tried, but he couldn't move it. The doctor suggested that they wait another day and try again, but Jerry's platoon sergeant who was standing nearby stepped forward. He looked at Jerry and commanded loudly, "Move the first finger of your right hand now," and Jerry moved that finger.

Maybe you've had a sergeant or a boss like that at some time. Of course, this kind of authority has its limits. You've probably heard the story of a second lieutenant at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, who discovered that he had no change when he was about to buy a soft drink from a vending machine. He flagged down a passing private and asked him, "Soldier, do you have change for a dollar?" "I

think so,” said the private cheerfully, “Let me take a look.” The second lieutenant drew himself up stiffly. “Soldier,” he said, “that’s no way to address an officer. We’ll start over again -- “Do you have change for a dollar?” The private saluted smartly, looked straight ahead and said, “No sir.”

In that situation pulling rank backfired. Some people have authority because of their rank or position. Others have authority because of their personality or their knowledge or their extreme competence. As a carpenter, Jesus had no positional authority in the community. His authority came from his wisdom and knowledge and his competence at interpreting God’s word. And even as a boy Jesus wowed people with his wisdom and his grasp of scripture. Of course, the people of Capernaum could not know that his authority came from a more important source; all they knew was that they had never heard an individual teach like Jesus taught. They said to one another, “He teaches as one who has authority, not as the teachers of the law.”

But even Jesus got interrupted from time to time. This time it was a man in a synagogue who disrupted Jesus’ teaching -- and that’s significant. Don’t think that all the needy people in this world are on the outside of the church; there are many people on the inside of the church who have very deep needs. Indeed, sometimes needy people are attracted to the church.

Mark tells us in this morning’s gospel that this man was possessed by an unclean spirit. We don’t know what Mark meant by his; most modern people dismiss the idea of demons and unclean spirits. We assume this is a pre-scientific language for mental illness, but who knows. Whatever the origin of his problem, obviously the man was deeply distressed, and he cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are -- the holy one of God.”

It’s interesting. The impure spirits recognized who Jesus was long before the people of Capernaum. “Be quiet,” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him.” And then something remarkable happened. The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they had asked each other, “What is this -- a new teaching and with authority? He even gives orders to impure spirits, and they obey him!”

And Mark tells us news about Jesus spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. “What is this?” the people asked. “A new teaching and with authority. He even gives order to impure spirits, and they obey him!”

So Jesus had authority because of his teachings, but he also had authority because of his power over what Mark calls “unclean spirits.” In other places we see his authority over disease and over nature, and even over death.

This brings me to something obvious that we need affirm about Jesus -- he was human, but he was unique and there was no one quite like him. There were other fine teachers in Galilee, but they could not cast out impure spirits, or turn water into wine, or heal the leper, or multiply the fishes and the loaves and forgive sins. There was something about Jesus which could not be said about his contemporaries. He had authority -- physical authority, spiritual authority and moral authority. And even after his death and resurrection, he had authority. When confronted by someone who was demon-possessed who was blind or physically challenged, all the disciples had to do was evoke Jesus' name and demons were cast out, and the physically challenged were made whole and the blind could see. That's authority.

The distinguished British intellectual Malcolm Muggeridge put it like this: "I may," he once said, "I suppose, pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets. That's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough to qualify for admission to the higher slopes of the Internal Revenue. That's success. Furnished with money and little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions. That's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I've said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact in our time. That's fulfillment. Yet I say to you -- and I beg to you to believe me -- multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing -- less than nothing -- a positive impediment measured against one drink of the living water that Jesus offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are. That's authority."

Jesus was a wonderful teacher, but no mere teacher has the authority to raise the dead. Jesus was a leader, a prophet, a moral visionary, but none of these explained his impact on his civilization.

Socrates taught for forty years, Plato for fifty years, Aristotle for forty years, and Jesus for only three and a half years. Yet the influence of Jesus' ministry infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined years of teaching of these greatest of philosophers. Jesus painted no pictures, yet some of the finest artists, such as Rafael and Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Jesus. Jesus wrote no poetry that we know of, but Dante and Milton and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Jesus. Jesus, we don't think, composed any music. Still, Haydn and Handel and Beethoven and Bach and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in Jesus' praise.

Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble carpenter of Nazareth. It took a Roman centurion, stationed at the foot of the cross who watched Jesus die, to sum it all up. "Surely this man, the centurion testified, was

the Son of God. No one else who has ever lived spoke with the authority with which Jesus spoke. He was unique; there has never been another person like him.”

And this brings me to an obvious question: If Jesus is the Son of God shouldn't we reflect his influence more in our lives? If he's the son of God most high, and if his teachings are the foundation upon which our lives are built, shouldn't that fact be reflective on how we live our life. One day we're going to see Jesus, and it doesn't seem to matter how we live our lives. Do you believe Jesus is who he says he is? If so, does his influence show in your life or does your life more accurately reflect simply the community in which you live and the people with whom you associate? He spoke with authority.

This brings me to the final question. If Jesus is who he says he is, shouldn't we tell the good news to others? A young boy from a non-Christian family named Palmer Ofuoku was placed in a mission school by his Nigerian parents because they knew he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for years, yet he did not convert to Christianity. He remained an adherent of traditional African religion. One year a new missionary came to the school who began to develop close relationships with the students including Palmer, and eventually the missionary led this young Nigerian to Jesus. Palmer Ofuoku explained the missionary's influence like this: “He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across.”

You know, I've heard a lot of definitions of Evangelism, but that is the best one I've ever heard. “He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across.” And that's what you and I should be doing each day of our lives -- building bridges of friendship to the people around us so that Jesus can walk across.

Jesus spoke with authority. There has never been another man like him. He is the Son of God. That ought to make a difference in how we live our lives. We ought to be telling others about Jesus. We ought to be building bridges to others so that Jesus may walk across.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs