

“Becoming the People of God: Among Your Own People”
Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28
A sermon preached for Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
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It is among your own people that your talents and gifts are known.

When I think of teachers I don't think of people who are particularly powerful, at least not by the world's standards. I think of Ms. Crockman, my 4th grade teacher who helped me memorize prepositions and much more, then told me years later that I was her favorite student she'd ever taught. Her ruler of discipline and my palm were well-known to each other. I think of Mr. Hudson, one of only a few male teacher role models, who actually made learning math fun. I had a mind for math I learned. I think of Dr. Hiebert, my favorite Bible professor in seminary, who, though being deaf, taught like we were living the moment with Jesus and Paul. “He told me, never mind when you preach to your professors what they might know. They have never heard a message like the one God will preach through you!”

I think of teachers like these and I'm amazed at the impact they've had on my life and the lives of so many other students. I'm amazed at the way good teachers continue to feed us long after we've left their presence. They were poorly paid, they spent long hours in school, they had to deal with some kids that didn't want to learn, they won't ever be famous, yet what power they had.

But I also had some lousy teachers too. You probably did as well. They also had power and often used it the wrong way. Teachers are powerful. They can change lives. They have the power to brutally wound or wonderfully heal young lives.

It is into this world of powerful teachers that our Gospel lesson calls us to enter. It is among your own people that your talents and gifts are known.

It is early in the ministry of Jesus in the gospel of Mark. Mark has no birth narrative, no childhood stories. Mark begins with John the Baptist preparing the way with his preaching, and with the baptism of Jesus, and then jumps immediately into Jesus' calling the disciples and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus is among his people. And that's where we are today — the beginning of Jesus' ministry. And how does it begin? With teaching. But not just any kind of teaching, it is teaching unlike that of the scribes, it is teaching with “authority.”

What's interesting is that we don't hear the content of Jesus' teaching. It's almost like Mark is saying, “the content isn't the important part.” In the gospel of Mark what makes Jesus' teaching authoritative is his person; his teaching is authoritative because of who he is — he is “the Holy One of God.”

When Jesus is among his people, they discern his unique skills and giftedness. Out of this community, Jesus' God-given role is viewed. The demon knew. Those in the synagogue knew Jesus is the real deal.

The people automatically contrast Jesus' teaching with what they know, with what they have experienced, with the teaching of the scribes. And, unlike the scribes, the people perceive Jesus to teach with "authority." In other words, Jesus brings something extra to the table, Jesus' person has something the scribes don't. What is that something extra? Well, look at what happens next — Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit. In the gospel of Mark, there's no differentiation between Jesus' teaching and his healing. It's all part of the same package. So, when the people hear Jesus teach with authority and see Jesus heal with authority, they're "astounded/amazed" because this is something new. This is not at all like what they've experienced with the scribes. This teacher is different. From Deut. 18:18, ***"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command."***

This teacher is different. Now, in today's world, we often use the words "power" and "authority" interchangeably. But for our purposes, I want to make a distinction between the two. If we peer into the world in which Jesus lived, the scribes, along with Pharisees and the Sadducees, had the "power." They were the interpreters of the law. They decided what and who was acceptable, and what and who was not acceptable. They were part of the "cultural power structure" of the day. Their "power" was simply a given. However, they did not necessarily have the support or confidence of the people, so they lacked "authority." Dictators, for example, may be powerful because they have an army behind them, but they lack genuine "authority" in the hearts and minds of the people. The Apartheid government may have had the power in South Africa for many years, but a jailed man named Nelson Mandela had the authority.

It's a similar situation for the scribes. The scribes are often presented in the gospels as oppressors of the people who lack a genuine understanding of the law and who possess no understanding of grace. In other words, they're lousy teachers — but they're still powerful because of their position in the society. They still get to call the shots.

I want to argue, on the other hand, that genuine "authority" comes not from one's position in the society but from somewhere beyond one's self. "Authority," I want to argue, is embodied through a sense of call. Good teachers, for example, have authority, their teaching is authoritative, because of their God-given gifts, because God has called them to be teachers. Good teachers are teachers for the right reasons. They teach not for the money (what money?), not for the prestige (what prestige?); they teach because they're called, because it's who they are as compassionate, caring, gracious people. And it's those God-given, God-blessed aspects of their person that gives their teaching authority.

So, Jesus is different from the scribes, because Jesus is said to teach with "authority." Jesus' authority comes from above. He is rightly identified by the demon as, "the Holy One of God." Jesus' authority is a derived authority, it comes directly from God. And it's this divine authority that we see unfold in the gospel of Mark. It's this divine authority that is constantly being critiqued by those in power because they feel threatened by it; it is this divine authority that is constantly being challenged because they fear losing their power. And they're right to feel threatened and afraid because it is Jesus' divine authority that ultimately trumps all worldly powers.

So, for our purposes, we're going to view this exorcism as an example of Jesus' overcoming evil in the world. And this is what astounds the people: Jesus has the authority to overcome evil. Which is still astounding today if you think about it. What other power or authority is there

that can overcome evil, eradicate it, make it go away? We put people in prison but that doesn't make evil go away. Or, more close to home, how many of us struggle with the presence of evil in our own lives? Do we have the power or authority on our own to just make evil go away? Isn't the Apostle Paul's self-reflective question our daily question: "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" (Romans 7:15)

There's an old Native American story about a chief instructing some braves about the struggle within. "It is like two dogs fighting inside of us," the chief told them. "There is one good dog who wants to do the right and the other dog wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight."

"Who is going to win in the end?" a young brave asks.

"The one you feed," the chief answered.

The only food available to feed the good dog within us comes from above, it comes from outside of us, it's the food of hope and grace whose singular nutritional authority comes from God. We do not have the power to overcome evil on our own. In fact, left to our own devices we will choose evil more often than good.

This is precisely why we begin every service of worship with a prayer of confession. Far from being the self-righteous hypocrites the world paints Christians out to be, we know all too well our own capacity for evil and our own need for forgiveness. And that's why we come here among our own people.

- It's here that we are perpetually astounded by the food of hope and grace.
- It's here that we meet the "Holy One of God" who has the authority to call evil out of us, to forgive us, and to transform us.
- It's here that we are fed on the scriptures read, proclaimed, and taught.
- It's here that we are nourished by the sacraments that make us one and transform us at the same time.

It is among your people you are known: Told you are loved by God; told you are gifted by God. We need more messages about being loved and accepted unconditionally.

"You Say" Lyrics by Lauren Daigle

I keep fighting voices in my mind that say I'm not enough
Every single lie that tells me I will never measure up
Am I more than just the sum of every high and every low?
Remind me once again just who I am, because I need to know

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
You say I am held when I am falling short
When I don't belong, oh You say that I am Yours
And I believe, oh I believe
What You say of me
I believe

It is among your own people that your talents and gifts are known.

And it's as we leave this place
and follow the Light out into the world that we,
we of all people while living among our people,
are given the authority to speak, and live,
and heal in ways that feed a hungry world.

Now that is truly astounding!