

As Ones with Authority
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Mark 1:21-28

A riddle: Five frogs sat on a log. Three decided to jump. How many were left? Answer: Five. Deciding to jump is not the same as jumping.

And isn't it true?! The space between our intentions and our actions is often miles wide, and perhaps never more so than when it comes to our spiritual lives. At least five of you good-naturedly accused me of preaching last Sunday's sermon on the call to discipleship expressly to them in a not-so-subtle attempt to get them to do a particular task. (At least I think it was good-naturedly!) But the reality is, every one of us experiences a gap between the things we want to do and fully believe we're supposed to do, and the things we actually do. It's one of the reasons for the excuse I've heard about why people don't attend church: "It's full of hypocrites." (I always respond, "Yes, but not so full we couldn't accommodate one more!")

On a deeper level, this credibility gap stems not so much from a lack of will (i.e. we are able to decide to jump), but from a lack of power (i.e. we're simply not able to jump). In his thoughtful book, *The Art of Soulmaking*, Grace Cathedral Dean Alan Jones suggests that the postmodern predicament emerges out of the vast gains in knowledge and technology that provide the possibility of a richer life than could have been imagined before, and our persistent inability to integrate those gains effectively. "Only connect," the call comes down from marketers, psychologists, and preachers alike. "Only we can't," we retort. [Jones, p. 28] And evidence of our impotency mounts as we see nations fighting, marriages breaking up, young people drifting, and many more adults shaking their heads at how life seems out of control and we are powerless to do anything about it.

Only we can't. Our morning text offers a contrasting picture, with a vivid example of Jesus' extraordinary power, exercised at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. Not only does he speak a word that awes and inspires, but at that word, evil is vanquished, and a person's debilitating illness is healed. Does that same word hold promise for us today, to imbue us with divine power, and transform "we can't" into "Lord, we are able?" It's the Sabbath day, and along with his newly-gathered disciples, Jesus comes to the synagogue. Listen for God's Word to the Church in the reading from the gospel according to Mark, in the first

chapter, beginning with the 21st verse (found on p. 35 of the chapel/pew Bibles if you'd like to read along). [MARK 1:21-28]

Right from the start, Jesus was perceived to be different from other religious leaders. The crowd's reaction to this particular healing is noteworthy because it grows out of their sense of correspondence between Jesus' teaching and his healing power. In contrast to others, this one actually *practices* what he *preaches*. They've simply never seen anything like it!

But it's more than credibility between word and deed that impresses the crowd. They're "astounded" at his teaching because it rings with authority, unlike their own religious leaders—a surprising critique, as scribes were regarded throughout the Jewish community as important and knowledgeable teachers, worthy of an ear. Something about him was different. The gospel writer doesn't even record the content of Jesus' teaching here. It's as if what he said wasn't as astonishing as the manner in which he spoke and conducted himself. He commanded attention and prompted questions about the power behind his proclamation.

The scene itself begins typically enough. Sabbath synagogue services consisted of prayers, blessings, reading of scripture, and then an interpretation of the text given by any man present who felt prepared and called by the spirit of God to speak. Apparently Jesus volunteered—an entirely logical thing for him to do-- and it's clear that he was making a strong, positive impression. The sudden appearance of a man possessed by an unclean spirit interrupts the flow of the story, and it's memorable because with such persons were not allowed to enter the sanctuary during services out of a sense that their spiritual "uncleanliness" would contaminate the faithful. In addition, the Law forbade Sabbath work, which included healings and exorcism, so Jesus' healing response to an outcast on that holy day would have cast this rising star into opposition with the religious establishment.

And what do you make of *this* irony? It's the "unclean spirit" who correctly identifies the source of Jesus' power. The gathered congregation is wowed by his authority, but they don't know where he got it. They do not recognize the presence and power of God as the authorizing agent, but the unclean spirit does. *"I know who you are—the Holy One of God!"* It's so typical of Mark to portray questionable spirits and others outside the religious power structure as those who recognize who Jesus is, while the insiders who would be expected to know do not.

Here at the very outset of Jesus' ministry, spiritual power is demonstrated in new and surprising ways. He did not reduce Divine Mystery to a

formula, a set of rules that if adhered to would yield blessing. Nor did he elevate certainty to an essential of faith—his teachings and actions always prompted more questions than answers. Instead, Mark wants us to see that the authority of Jesus flows from the very heart of God, and it has the power to overcome evil and liberate humanity from its chokehold. Have we in the Church today fallen back into practices that derive their power from sources other than the Holy One of God? Are we captivated by success rather than sacrifice? By headlines rather than hidden acts of compassion and service? Church growth research points to a shift in American churches towards “disseminating information people need in order to gain more control over their lives and to ensure that they achieve individual happiness.” [*Theology, News & Notes, Spring 2005*] What bothers me about that shift is that it promises far more than it delivers. The control we so crave is largely an illusion, and I don’t see much evidence that people are happier today than ever before.

Which suggests to me that those of us in the Church should be mindful of the way we communicate our message, that we do so in humility and with a spirit of openness to correction. Certainty is by no means a mark of divine authority, and in fact borders dangerously close to arrogance when it claims to be. So much religious rhetoric these days purports to be the Word of the Lord! The text offers a lens through which to assess that rhetoric—are the actions performed by that Word ones that heal and redeem, liberate and restore? Or do they divide and exclude? *By their fruits shall you know them*, Jesus said elsewhere, and what is foreshadowed here is made explicit time and again throughout Jesus’ ministry.

With only a word from Jesus, the spirit is silenced and the man is freed from this terrible burden. And I believe it is here that we learn how the followers of Jesus have even a prayer of accomplishing the work of God’s Kingdom to which we are called. *What is this?* asks the puzzled crowd. But in some ways, I think it’s the wrong question. By asking the “what”—the content of a new teaching—they risked missing what was truly new in Jesus’ life. It’s not about the what, but about the who: *Who are you?*

Friends, let our first priority—as individuals and as a faith community—be to wrestle with that question. If Jesus channeled the very power and presence of God during his earthly life, so too may his followers in the world today. Like the crowds back then, we may find it hard to recognize what God is doing right under our noses. We will have to engage in the work of discernment, listening for that powerful Word, praying for that insight, watching for the places where people experience acceptance and healing, a power for living they could not have imagined before.

If absolute control of our lives is illusion (and you know it is), it is also true that we are not powerless. We do not have to be ruled by fear.

The terrible consequences of such fear are driven home in the recently-released film "Brokeback Mountain," from a short story by Annie Proulx, and an odds-on favorite for Oscar awards. The film explores a number of themes, but what seemed especially truthful was its portrayal of the damage done to the human heart and spirit when fear dominates our choices and decisions. The movie's most poignant scene – tellingly, in a closet – mutely but eloquently expresses the loss such imprisonment always yields.

It doesn't have to be that way. There is a power afoot which liberates and lends strength, which by love casts out fear.

That power is the Spirit of Jesus Christ and is offered to all who will receive it. Friends, take hold of the power. For freedom Christ has set us free. Our liberation begins when we become his disciples; the word literally means to "stand under." When we stand under his authority, we won't just talk the talk; with God's power and by God's grace, we can learn to walk the walk.

A riddle: Five hundred Christians were sitting in church. Five hundred decided to follow Jesus. How many are left?

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO DO FAR MORE ABUNDANTLY THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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