

**A Sermon by Rev. Eric R. Dillenbeck**  
**Recognizing Authority**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**February 8, 2009**

Mark 1:21-28

<sup>21</sup>The new disciples followed Jesus and they went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

<sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

<sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

<sup>27</sup>They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” <sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

**“Recognizing Authority”**

A few weeks ago my brother, Ray, sent me a text message: “Dude, Mr. Lee, is retiring this year.” I have to admit, I was impressed that my brother even remembered Mr. Lee, who was the Principle of our Elementary school. Of course, Ray spent enough time with him, he should remember him.

So, it turns out, Mr. Lee was one of my brother’s favorite educators even though he spent so much time “visiting” with him in his office. I remember I thought Mr. Lee was a giant! He looked like he was 10 feet tall. In actuality he was about 6’6”, but to a tiny kindergartener he looked HUGE.

I still remember my first all school assembly at Mamie P. Whitesides. Mr. Lee was still new to the school. He welcomed all of us back to school and did the usual introductions: the school nurse, the school secretary, the lunch ladies, the janitors, the people we would see around school regularly. I remember, he had introduced everyone on the stage when he said, “I have one more introduction,” and he paused.

There was a murmur in the crowd and an older kid whispered, “Here it comes.” Mr. Lee went on, “I want to introduce you to Mr. Mac, which is short for Mr. Smacks” and he lifted up a huge paddle with holes drilled in it. I don’t know what he said after that. All I knew was that I never wanted to meet Mr. Mac. In that moment all the kids in my school recognized that Mr. Lee was in charge; we recognized his power and place in the school.

On a day, very much like today, but long ago, a group of people gathered in a synagogue in Capernaum and were surprised, in fact, they were astounded, when a new teacher showed up and taught and they recognized his authority.

The author of Mark does not mention what Jesus said. We have no idea what he taught. What we are told is that those in attendance recognized that this new teacher, Jesus, had authority, unlike the scribes. Which is ironic, because the scribes were seen as leaders in the Jewish community. They were the ones who copied the Torah. They knew the stories and they held a measure of power, but it was to Jesus that the people gave authority.

At Montreat Conference Center's recent Collegiate Conference the renowned Baptist preacher and teacher, Tony Campolo, spoke to a group of 1000 college students about the distinctions between power and authority.

In his presentation he quoted Max Weber (VABER), a sociologist, who defines power "as the ability to coerce, you have power if you can force someone to obey you<sup>i</sup>." My elementary school principle, Mr. Lee, had power. He had Mr. Mac, and our parents' permission, as his enforcers. The Scribes in ancient Israel had power. They were keepers of God's story, they were guards of the social order and they had tradition and custom as their enforcers.

Tony Campolo says, with power, "you obey because you have to<sup>ii</sup>." We obeyed Mr. Lee because we did not want to meet Mr. Mac. The ancient Israelites listened to and obeyed the scribes' teachings because they could separate you from God and community by deeming you unclean, which would bar you from attending the synagogue.

But in the Synagogue that day, Mark goes out of his way to say that the crowd recognized Jesus' authority. It was not Jesus' power they responded to. They recognized his authority. Tony Campolo says, Power and authority are different. With power you obey because you have to. "With authority, you obey because you want to<sup>iii</sup>." Power is inspired by a measure of fear and control. Authority is inspired by loving sacrifice and integrity.

We have no idea what Jesus taught that day in Mark's gospel, the text does not tell us, but when we look at the whole story of scripture we see that Jesus taught by word and deed, by what he said and by what he did not say. From this perspective we can see that Jesus' authority came from his life, from his loving nature. That nature was on display in today's text. As Jesus was teaching, a crazed man came into the synagogue and interrupted him, screaming, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Jesus did not leave this possessed man to live a life of solitary tortured despair. No, he rebuked the powers that were controlling him and restored this man to wholeness.

Jesus lived his authority, demonstrating for those who followed him what it means to be a disciple. In scripture, we see Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners; we see Jesus healing on the Sabbath day. We see Jesus moved by the feisty faith of a Syrophoenician woman who dared to argue with him for the healing of her daughter. In all of these things Jesus' authority brings about the unexpected, it restores wholeness, it brings about reconciliation, it brings the outsider into the fold. We see that Jesus did not use his authority for himself, but for the life of the world.

In a society where the church's power has evaporated and its authority has become relative, we should pay attention.

A long time ago the church became accustomed to power. It happened when the Roman emperor, Constantine, converted to Christianity. Overnight the church's influence was used to unify an empire and congregations not only came out of hiding but exploded in membership. Through the years, the church's power was used to install royalty, to run nations. But as the church's power grew, it became like the scribes and struggled. There is a sense that people began to come to church because that was what was expected, because that was what they had to do, not because it was what they wanted. Thankfully the church's power has waned and there are signs of the people of God searching to reclaim the authority of Christ, which comes from bearing witness to his sacrificial love.

In a world that is crying out for redemption, forced to its knees by the weight of financial strain and hardship, the church needs to speak; the world needs the church's witness to love of Christ. But the world is not listening to the church that speaks from a place of power, the world is looking, hungering, for the voice of authority. And as the author of Mark helps us to see, Jesus' authority comes when words and deeds are linked, authority comes when the world perceives that the church's actions are preaching louder than its words.

In the bulletin this week you will find announcements about a few ways the church is seeking to help us live our faith. These are not opportunities designed to garner the church more power or even authority, but rather opportunities for us to embody the love of Jesus Christ at work in the world.

Bags of Grace, Job Search ministry, Eradicating Global Poverty, Church in the City Initiative – all examples of how this Fairmount community is trying to live our faith, not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world.

How are you called to live your faith?

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<sup>i</sup> Tony Campolo Keynote address from Montreat Collegiate Conference in January 2009

<sup>ii</sup> Tony Campolo Keynote address from Montreat Collegiate Conference in January 2009

<sup>iii</sup> Tony Campolo Keynote address from Montreat Collegiate Conference in January 2009