

AS ONE WITH AUTHORITY
Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
January 29, 2012
Scripture: Psalm 111, Mark 1:21-28

I wonder if there is anyone among us who has not had a teacher who has touched our life in some significant way? Someone who has had an impact on your intellectual development and growth? Maybe a professor in college. A high school teacher. A mentor at work or a guide in life who taught you more than the lessons in the book.

I remember my first grade teacher, Miss Witt. She taught at the Edison School in St. Joseph, Missouri. She was, to the eyes of a six year old boy, beautiful, long brunette hair, kind, patient, young. I think we were the first class she ever taught.

I remember Delia Barthold, teacher of the 7th and 8th Grade speech class. We called her Old School Faithful, because the school colors at Bliss Jr. High were gold and blue, and Miss Barthold had gold teeth and blue hair.

I remember Henry Baer, and David Hopper, and Donald Dawe at Macalester College, history and religion professors. It was Dr. Dawe who led me to Union Seminary here in New York.

But the mentor and teacher during my formal education who had the greatest influence on me was Edmund Steimle, professor of preaching at Union Seminary here in New York, a wizened and grumpy old German Lutheran, the frequent voice of the Protestant Hour on radio, and tough old bird, about my age now when (at that time) I was in my twenties. He sat in the back of the classroom day after day listening to young preachers struggle with the craft of homiletics using their inept words and fumbling theology. It was, he thought, a life and death struggle to help students give life to the Living Word.

He always had a corn cob pipe in his mouth, and while I don't remember him ever smoking it while a student was preaching, he would often fill it and tamp it down, and light it after the sermon was over, as the discussion in the class got under way about the strengths and weaknesses of what we had just heard. No teacher would smoke a pipe in class today, but this was a long time ago.

He usually allowed the students in the classroom to say what they thought was good or not so good about the sermon first, and after all that had been said, he would render the verdict, like a judge from behind the bench offering the sentence for the offense, having listened to all the evidence and being unmoved.

Usually his comments were tough. "Give me in one sentence the gist of what it is you think the text is saying," he would say to the novice preacher. And in a sentence or two, the student would summarize the text. "And so what?" Steimle would ask. "Why should we care about that?"

The quivering student would offer a word or two to explain the importance of the scripture which he had just explained at considerable length in the sermon. And if the

student were right, or at least close to accurately summarizing the text in a sentence or two, Steimle would bark, “Then why the hell didn’t you say that the first time?”

He often delighted in telling a story about preaching in a church in South Carolina where he announced that the main question addressed in the gospels was, “What is a heavenly God doing in a hell of a world like this,” and an elderly woman in the back of the church stood up to say, “Young man, you should have your mouth washed out with soap.” To which he said, “That may be right, but let me finish before you start.”

He scared me to death. I was afraid that the verdict he might render on my sermons would be the death sentence to my hopes as a preacher. But he was always kind to me. He treated me as if I had potential. Told me I did. Encouraged me and showed me how he preached in a way that I could emulate.

He taught with authority and I continue to this day to have a picture of him on my desk over in the study in the South Wing where I write. His photograph, while showing a stern old German Lutheran, nevertheless looks a little softer after all these years, his expression a little more friendly, his memory dearer now that he is gone.

I suppose all of us have had teachers who have influenced our lives for the good, who have opened us to potential within ourselves that we did not know was there, and who by their example have inspired us. They taught us as one with authority.

Authoritative teaching is a funny thing you know. It’s a two way street. It requires teachers who can capture our imagination with their knowledge and impart their excitement with such skill that it’s contagious.

It also requires something else. It requires our readiness to receive what they have to offer. As one teacher of teachers, Parker Palmer has written, “I ask the question... not ‘What made your mentor great?’ but ‘What was it about *you* that allowed great mentoring to happen?’”¹

And isn’t that an interesting question? Because it opens the door to our taking a look at what makes us teachable, what opens us to learn from another. What makes the teaching of another authoritative.

Now this is not just an idle question because it is one that is addressed by Mark’s gospel as Jesus begins his public ministry. And one of the first things that Mark wants us to know about Jesus is that he is a teacher and that he teaches as one with authority, which in the long run say as much about the deep hunger and ready openness of those who heard him as it does about his gifts for teaching.

The story of Jesus’ first teaching comes in the context of the first acts of Jesus’ public ministry. Mark skips over the birth of Jesus, his childhood and adolescence, whatever schooling he had, whatever mentors he admired, whatever influences shaped his life, and leads directly to a grown up Jesus ready to start out on his own.

He has been tested in the wilderness and he has just called his first disciples when we enter the story, Peter and Andrew and James and John, who have dropped everything and followed him. And the next thing we know they enter the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath.

Mark tells us that Jesus went to the synagogue to teach. Right out of the box, Mark wants us to know that Jesus is a teacher. But not just any teacher, a remarkable teacher, a teacher of the law, a teacher who not only puts into words the lessons he is offering, but also puts them into action.

Mark says when Jesus began to preach the people were astounded with what he said, because he taught them as one with authority, and not as the scribes.

And wouldn't you have loved to have been there... in the synagogue that day to hear that lesson? To look at him say what it was that he was saying. To follow his eyes and his movement as he stood there reading scripture and discussing its meaning? Now there's a preaching class worth attending.

Mark no sooner has us thinking about that moment, Jesus teaching, holding forth, captivating his listeners, when a man possessed by an unclean spirit entered the temple and disrupted the moment. And isn't that the way things go in church?

You finally hear a good sermon, you're leaning forward trying to catch every word, thinking about the thoughts that are coming to you, caught up in the world of the preacher and the story, and somebody's cell phone goes off, or a child gets restless and starts kicking the back of your pew, or somebody opens a door and all the sound from the hallway comes pouring in, and the moment is broken, and there you sit, frustrated by the disruption, having a hard time getting back to that place where you were in your thoughts.

In the synagogue in Capernaum, it was a man possessed with an unclean spirit that ruined the moment. Mark says he was convulsing and crying out with a loud voice, "What have you to do with us, Jesus? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

He's right, of course, but now is not yet the time to declare Jesus the Holy One of God. And yes, he has come to challenge the powers of the unclean spirits, the broken, and the ill in body and mind. But the timing is bad, and the demoniac's voice is uncertain and self-defensive, scattershot in its aim, and this moment at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is not the moment to be dealing with all that.

So Jesus tells him to "Be silent." And with just that much the unclean spirit obeys him. And Mark tells us that the people were amazed and kept asking, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him."

Mark will make this point again and again in his gospel that Jesus *is* the lesson, even more than his words or his parables or his commentary, it is *his life* that we must emulate.

Because his is teaching not in word only but also in actions. In Mark's gospel Jesus' teachings are coupled with demonstrations of his power and authority again and again; miracles in which the demons obey, and unclean spirits are cast out, and forces of nature are harnessed. When the storm comes up on the Sea of Galilee and the disciples wake him to save them, it's "Teacher" they call him.

When he fed the five thousand it was on the heels of his teaching them in that deserted place. When he healed the boy with an unclean spirit whom his disciples had failed to heal, it was by the name "Teacher" that the boy's father attracted Jesus' attention. When Jesus healed the blind man, Bartimaeus, it was "Teacher" that Bartimaeus called him.

Mark wants us to know that the power of his teaching was found in Jesus' miraculous deeds every bit as much as in his words, because his words and his deeds were seamless.

And it's that, I think that caused those who heard him in the synagogue and on the hillside and in the temple and in the house to say, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him."

Seldom do we find a teacher whose words and whose life are a seamless garment. But such was Jesus.

Invariably who we really are comes out, and trying to be what you are not can tear your life apart.

I mentioned Parker Palmer earlier. In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, he tells the story of consulting for a faculty workshop on a campus some years ago. He had been warned about a professor, a "curmudgeonly and unpopular teacher" who was nonetheless brilliant in his scholarly field. Of the forty people in the group, Palmer's host said, Professor Smith had probably signed up not to learn about teaching but to debunk whatever was being taught.

So with trepidation Palmer said he began the workshop by inviting people to introduce themselves by talking about their mentors.

By the time it was Professor Smith's turn six or eight people had spoken with insight and feeling, and there was a spirit of openness in the room. Fearing that Professor Smith would spoil all that, everyone was surprised when it became clear that he, too, had been touched by the quality of the exchange.

"He told the story of his mentor with the hesitancy that comes from speaking of sacred things and – as he talked about how hard he had tried to model his own career after his mentor's – he surprised [his colleagues], and surely himself, by choking up.

Later, in a private conversation, [Smith] told Palmer that for twenty years he had tried to imitate his mentor's way of teaching and being, and it had been a disaster. He and his mentor were very different people, and Smith's attempt to clone his mentor's style had distorted his identity and integrity. He had lost himself in an identity not his own – a painful insight that took courage to embrace, but one with the promise of growth."²

So it is with any of our teachers, especially the ones whom we would most emulate, whose lessons and life are in our thoughts. We cannot be them. But we can be ourselves influenced and shaped by them. And to be more our own selves is one of the chief ends of learning.

It must have been difficult for Peter and Andrew and James and John and the others who followed Jesus to have such a one so wise, so discerning, so compassionate as their teacher. Who could live up to that? They were at best inept.

They didn't understand his parables, they needed private tutoring, they never accepted the fact that he must die before his arrest, and at the end of his journey one betrayed him, one denied him, and all scattered from the garden to leave him the night of his arrest. Someone has said that as Jesus looks down from the cross at his failed disciples he must have wondered whether he had made the right choices.

None of us are very good disciples, even the best among us. But that should not keep us from emulating or learning from this one whose most important lesson of all was his life, given in love for the sake of us all.

It is, after all, on the cross that his most important lesson was imparted. Greater love has no one than this; that he lay down his life for another.

Jesus was a great teacher, a master of the short story, the parable, to make a point crystal clear and to tease into involvement the imagination of the hearer. He was one whose preaching inspired hope in the lives of those who were touched by his simple explanation of who God is and what God requires.

He reduced the 613 commandments of Jewish law to two simple imperatives: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.”

His thoughts on peacemaking, turning the other cheek, non-violent resistance, giving away your cloak as well as your coat to one who asks, is a way of life that we have yet to *try* much less to *achieve*. And his ability to not only understand our broken nature, but to do something about it is unparalleled. He was a teacher whose greatest lesson was himself, a life we cannot match.

But to follow as his disciples, to learn of his ways, to live in his spirit, is the call that is ours; to follow where he leads and to go where he would take us.

Frederick Buechner has written, “In the last analysis, I have always believed, it is not so much their subjects that the great teachers teach as it is themselves.”³ Maybe that’s what that crowd in Capernaum understood that day when they were so amazed at his teaching, which they said was unlike any other that they knew, for he taught as one with authority and not as the scribes. At last, someone whose words and whose life had something unmistakably of God in it.

In a few minutes we will be receiving new members, just in time for this new class of 21 to participate and vote in the annual congregational meeting. As a part of their reception last Saturday with the Session, I asked all of them the question from the Book of Order, “Do you intend to be Jesus’ disciples, to obey his word and to show his love?” They all said they would. We all have said that we would at some time in the past as well.

And so we promise. And so we follow this great teacher who was not so much imparting his subject as it was that he was imparting himself. And would that we all could be more like him.

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¹ Parker Palmer, **The Courage to Teach**. (San Francisco, Josey-Bass, 1998) 21.

² Ibid. 23 Palmer refers to this teacher as Professor X. For ease of expression I have changed his name to Professor Smith.

³ **Now and Then**. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983. 12-13.