

“Talk is Cheap”

Mark 1: 21-28

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Lynne M. Dolan

In this post-inaugural, honeymoon period we are fascinated with everything the new president does. What is he wearing? What does he eat? What is his morning routine like? I don't know if this information tells us something significant about President Obama or if we are just nosey. The other day I saw a story on a morning news program comparing Bush's style of leadership to Obama's. People observe that President Obama is more casual, more cooperative, and perhaps even more conciliatory than his predecessor was. For example, you are likely to see the president, *sans* suit coat in the Oval Office. When President Obama needs to speak with a colleague he does not summon him or her to his office. He gets up and seeks that person out. Change has come to the presidency; not only in the person who holds the office, but in how he understands his authority.

Today's scripture lessons speak to this issue of authority. In Mark's gospel we find Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. He is in Capernaum teaching for the first time in the synagogue and he makes a huge impression. After he speaks everyone begins to wonder about this man Jesus. He is not a scribe. He was not trained in the same institutes of higher learning as the other leaders. He is simply Jesus of Nazareth, but already people understand there is something remarkable about him. Those who hear him can't put their finger on it yet, but they know he is different. He teaches with authority, a different kind of authority. Jesus' authority does not come from years of study or by the conferring of a particular title. Jesus' authority is more elusive and far more compelling.

What made Jesus' teaching so astonishing? We are not sure because Mark tells us nothing about the content of his teaching. Mark is more concerned with the way Jesus responds to people. What Jesus tells the people may be new and innovative, but it is the way he interacts with them that transforms lives. This is true throughout Jesus' ministry. In this story, Jesus is teaching when he is confronted by a raving lunatic, or so he was perceived by the staid members of the congregation. A man with an unclean spirit enters and starts shouting at Jesus. How he got past the gatekeepers no one will ever know. Either he passed for one of them long enough to enter or the ushers were so mesmerized by Jesus' teaching they did not notice him.

This man announces to the congregation that Jesus is the Holy One of God. How can he know this about Jesus? Jesus instructs the unclean spirit to depart from this man. He does not insist the man be escorted out. He does not instruct an usher to take him to the food pantry basket to get him something to eat. Jesus heals him without even touching him. He commands the spirit to depart, releasing the man from bondage so that he is free to follow the leading of a more life giving spirit. Jesus' response is swift, decisive, compassionate and more loving than I could imagine doing myself.

Mark uses this episode to teach us something about Jesus. By ministering to this man with the unclean spirit, Jesus directly challenges the authority of the current spiritual leaders. Their authority comes from the conferring of tradition and years of fastidious study. Their authority has been passed down to them and they jealously guard it. However they would likely have responded quite differently to this man. Jesus' authority is different. His authority comes from within. God has bestowed it upon him at his baptism; therefore, he is not concerned if anyone challenges it or if they threaten to take it away.

At the most unlikely moment, this man confronts Jesus. He does not see this interruption as a problem. He is not angry with this man. He has compassion for him. Mark wants us to understand that what is remarkable is not what Jesus teaches, but how he behaves. Jesus lived as one who had authority, different from that of tradition. Even early in his ministry, people understood this and were willing give their lives to follow this man.

The people gathered that day in Capernaum recognized immediately that Jesus was sharing a new teaching, something radically different, and something that had the power to change their lives. They both heard what he said and saw how he responded. The preacher Barbara Lundblad says that "when we hear and see this new teaching, we will be moved—if not toward clear answers—at least in certain clear directions." Jesus wants us to know that if we are willing to follow we must also be ready to respond, as immediately and passionately as Jesus responds to the man with the unclean spirit. Somehow it never seems that easy for us. Something seems to tether us to our seat, keeping us from leaping forward to respond to the one in need.

In this story, Mark teaches us three things about Jesus' authority that can inform our discipleship. First, Jesus' ministry was about inclusion not exclusion. His authority moved him to include those who had previously been excluded, who have been relegated to the margins. It is what liberation theologians call an authority "from below." Jesus welcomes those whom others would never let in, tax collectors, prostitutes, poor widows and sinners of every kind. No one was excluded. He teaches us that we ought to be suspicious of religious authorities that call for exclusion. This was not Jesus' way.

Jesus always valued people over rules and tradition. He came to dismantle the old ways, to proclaim a new way of being, to create a new tradition. We long for certainty, for rules that clearly define boundaries of what is right and wrong, who is in and who is not. Jesus comes rather to bless ambiguity. He calls us to embrace a discerning spirit. Rather than worry about tradition, with the way we have always done it, Jesus teaches us to become open to the spirit leading us to a new way of being. Jesus models flexibility and an astonishingly unconditional kind of love.

Thirdly, Jesus teaches us to be aware of our human limitations. Barbara Lundblad in her sermon on this text says, "We long for absolutes, but Jesus' authority was marked by admitting there were some things he did not know, only God knows. Theologian and poet Gerhard Frost tried to open us up to the possibility of this different kind of authority in his poem, 'Loose-Leaf',

When your options are either
To revise your beliefs
Or to reject a person,
Look again.

Any formula for living
That is too cramped
For the human situation
Cries for rethinking.

Hardcover catechisms
Are a contradiction
To our loose-leaf lives.

I love that phrase, “our loose-leaf lives.” Our life stories are always being edited. We are being informed and reformed by what we come to know and understand about ourselves. How sad it would be if I were not willing to rip up a few pages of my life story and start fresh. What a difference it would make if we embraced the delete function in our lives and saw it not as a loss but an opportunity. This is what Jesus is teaching me today. God’s understanding is not the same as my understanding, but the spirit that led Jesus is alive leading us into what we might become in this moment in time. The spirit invites to become more comfortable with a loose-leaf life.

Jesus stands with us in the midst of our loose-leaf lives promising to be present with us as we struggle to find answers. He sends us with a new authority into the mission field to embody peace with justice. Each day is a blessed opportunity to be the people of God in this new time. Jesus invites us to live a loose leaf life together, always praying, always discerning, always learning, and always growing.

Jesus understood that talk is cheap. His teaching may have moved people, however the way he lived and loved said spoke a truth beyond words. He calls his disciples to live boldly, never afraid to respond as impetuously as Jesus did to minister to those who were in need. Jesus did much more than teach. He reached out and took life by the hands, unafraid to love, or heal or hold the one who needed it most. This is what empowered people to give their lives to him in joyful service. Our traditions are meaningless if they keep us boxed in. Our scriptures are powerless if they do not lead us to respond to people in a new way. Our faith is incomplete if all we do is listen when we really ought to respond. May we live a more loose leaf life, doing and loving and healing and hoping as Jesus did for the sake of the kin-dom? Amen

Source: “A New Kind of Authority,” Mark 1:21-28, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, [The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad](#), Speaker, Day 1 Broadcast from February 2, 1997.