

"A New Teaching?"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – January 31, 2021

PLEASE READ:
Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Mark 1:21-28

Do you know Fred Furr, Carol Lance, or Lloyd Johnson? They are powerful people. At least, they have authority in my life. Fred Furr was my fifth-grade teacher. I just arrived at a new school and new life from Pennsylvania to Oregon. I had already established myself as a fighter on the playground and was raising havoc in the classroom. Two of my new friends and I were disrupting class. Mr. Furr made us stay after class and gave us "the talk." He said very simply, and I think I can remember his exact words: "You will be leaders some day. The question is, what kind of leaders are you going to be? Are you going to lead others for good, or for bad?" That mini lecture really impressed me, and I've remembered it many times in the 50 years since Mr. Furr talked to us...

Carol Lance taught social studies at my Junior High. I always remembered how she taught on China, and what a mysterious country it is, with so many different ethnic groups... Later in college her class came back to me as I had to make a decision to forego my pre-med school training schedule for a two-year hiatus of history and language studies in one of the first undergraduate exchange programs between the U.S. and China back in 1982. Carol Lance planted a seed that blossomed years later into my first international trip. I'm sure that experience led to life in four more countries over 25 years, and extensive travel in the world...

Lloyd Johnson was my high school advanced placement English teacher. He taught me how to read, to write, and to think. He demanded excellence, essays every week, and would rant about how brain-washed we all were. He impressed upon us how important it was to learn to ask questions, because nothing was ever what it seemed on the surface... I'm quite sure it was his encouragement to question that led me to theological studies which in turn led to my sense of call to pastoral ministry.

When you think about it, that's all rather amazing. Here I am 60 years old and in a very different season, but those teachers still influence my life. They were paid poorly. I'm sure you have never heard of any of them. But consider their power!

Teachers are powerful. They change lives. Through teaching they open up new worlds. They have, within their hands, the power terribly to hurt or wonderfully to heal young lives. I invite you to remember some of your teachers... because most of us are deeply, forever indebted to some caring teacher in our past. Some people never get over the damage done to them by some cruel or uncaring teacher. Teachers are powerful...

So today, when we read that Jesus entered the synagogue in Capernaum and began to teach, you ought to take note. Jesus was a teacher. They never called him Reverend, but "Rabbi," which means "teacher."

I'll admit that if you compare standing up and giving a lecture in a synagogue to some of the other things Jesus did - like stilling a storm, or curing a blind man, or raising a young girl from the dead - this may seem unimpressive. Even when Mark tells us that all who heard his teaching "were astounded" because "he taught them as one having authority," well, a good lesson, even a well-taught lesson, is not that remarkable.

But the class quickly got more interesting. A man barges into the synagogue screaming "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth... I know who you are, the Holy One of God!"

Jesus rebuked the spirit within the man, that strange spirit that knew more about Jesus than anyone else in the synagogue, and the man was healed.

People were amazed saying, "What is this? It's a new teaching! And with authority! Even unclean spirits obey him!" Now think about it for a moment. What is missing here in Mark's account. What are we left not hearing about?

Mark doesn't mention at all *what* Jesus taught. That powerful lecture is lost forever... Those words are not recorded on papyrus, codex, or the cloud. Mark does not tell us *what* Jesus taught, but rather *how* Jesus taught - with authority, authority over the spirits that torment people, authority over life and death, good and evil. Elsewhere, Jesus would refer to himself as the strong Son of God who enters into the world to battle and to bind Satan ("*The Enemy*"). Jesus is the teacher whose transforming truth is not only in his words, but in his deeds.

Isn't it interesting that the first miraculous work that Mark reports, the very first action that Jesus performs in Mark's Gospel, is the act of teaching? And Jesus is a teacher with authority.

I think you need such a teacher. I think we all need such a teacher. And when I say Jesus is a teacher with authority, I want to clarify that by "authority" *this One has the power to rewrite the storyline of our lives, like an author can determine how the story line in the book will conclude.*

One of my favorite authors, Parker Palmer, wrote a book called *The Courage to Teach*. In it he talks about how the best classrooms are a "community of truth." I believe that is the way Jesus teaches, calling us all into relationships that transform and heal. Jesus, you see, gave a vivid instruction that day in Capernaum about the liberating power of the Word made flesh. Jesus powerfully exhibited how truth in the faith community is relational, *face to face*. Our English word Truth, you may recall, is related to the Old English word *troth*, as in betrothed... Yes, we work out our truth in community, and our ultimate truth is when we stand face to face with the God who loves us and sets us free for life.

What kind of knowledge do you think Jesus conveyed to people? How would you summarize the essential teaching of Jesus?

Our lives and life together in this past year have been strange. It's been confusing with political demonstrations and mass frustration with the status quo. It is alarming that according to the FBI, "domestic violent extremism" is one of the greatest threats to our national security right now. We're all so tired of living in polarization, but also tired of isolation and fear because of COVID-19. I hear people say, "we live in crazy times." There is much that seems out of kilter, chaotic, frighteningly inexplicable, as chaotic and confused as that poor, demented man who barged into the synagogue screaming that day in Capernaum.

But Jesus the teacher healed that man. Jesus silenced the raging spirits, taught the wondering congregation with authority that with God liberation, peace, healing is possible.

I think that's one of the reasons why you are sharing in worship this morning, even if you did not know why. You are looking for answers to life's big questions, searching for reasons, why, groping for some discernable pattern in the silent suffering that is part of our lives. We're bombarded with information, facts, and figures. We don't need any more information. We need to see the larger picture, some more reliable pattern. We need a teacher with authority larger than our own.

I know things happen to you that you cannot explain. This world confuses and overwhelms us with mysteries. I know that sometimes the most confusing thing in your world is you, your thoughts, and actions. I know that, because the same is true for me. We need a teacher.

Later, Mark says that this teacher commanded the waves of the sea to be silent, and they were (4:38). This teacher raised a little girl from the dead (5:35), fed a thousand people with just a few loaves of bread (6:34), and cured a man of epilepsy (9:17). All of this is told as Mark's way of reassuring us: you have a teacher, one who teaches with authority.

I had another teacher I studied under named Edward Dowey. I'd be surprised if any of you ever heard of him, either. He actually studied in Zürich under Emil Brunner years before I lived and worked there. Dr. Dowey taught at *Princeton Theological Seminary* and I was sitting in his course on reformed theology. It was a course to answer this question about the *what* of Jesus teaching. What is at the heart of the Gospel? What is at the center of our faith if you had to boil it down?

Ed Dowey told the legendary story about a conference he attended to honor Karl Barth and acknowledge the huge contribution he had made to theology. As most of you know, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth is probably the 20th century's greatest theologian, his voluminous works still being explored and interpreted. Well, there amidst this august group of scholars from around the world, he was asked by a student, "How would you summarize all of the hundreds of pages of the Christian theology and Biblical commentary you have written?"

After pausing briefly, he sang for them, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so."

That's not just a song for little children, you know. That's the message that has power over even the worst damage, as Luther would say, that the world, the flesh, and the devil can throw at you... Jesus loves me. Jesus taught about God's love against all odds. Jesus used a lot of visual aids, even contorting his body to transform a cross, the instrument of this world's cruelest rejection and hatred, into the symbol of God's infinite grace, acceptance, love, and power of life.

If you can say, Jesus loves me, this I know, what a world of healing that can bring to even the worst sin sick soul. And if *we* can experience healing, just maybe *our world* can experience healing. Maybe we can be a community which lives up to our mission to learn continuously, and to let more teachers speak into our lives. Teachers like MLK, and Brian McLaren, or Dorothy Bass, or Suzanne Stabile, or Richard Rohr, or James Baldwin... Maybe the hill we climb together is a hill that we can climb *together*, so that all God's people might experience God's healing Word of Love.

I hope this not a new teaching for you today, but if it is, I want you to do a little homework and *memorize it*. It's the essential message of the Gospel, that in Jesus Christ you can know that you are loved, that you are cared for, that you belong. And that the love of God can not only change you, it can set you free to change the world.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.