

## “The Healing Authority”

B Epiphany Four

Mark 1:21-28; January 28, 2018; 10:00 am

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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### Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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." But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

### I. STORIES WITHIN

It's a story within a story. In fact, there are *numerous* stories here—all interwoven and asking to be heard. Stories crying out in a loud voice—*naming* the Holy; wondering aloud what's to happen; fearing and rejoicing all at the same time about what is happening!

It's a story that holds true to the writer of Mark. They, the disciples and Jesus, went to Capernaum, and when the sabbath came, Jesus *immediately* went into the synagogue and taught.

And immediately, something was different! For suddenly, this was no ordinary day with a run-of-the-mill teacher/preacher! Who *was* this guy?! And listen to him! Get a load of this message and delivery! Such authority. Such compelling teaching. Not like the usual “stock cast of scribes” you get here on a usual Saturday in January.

### II. NEW TEACHING. AUTHORITY OR SCAM?

How do you *tell* when someone new brings a “new teaching,” onto the scene, whether it's *authentic*? ‘Is it real or is it Memorex?’ we used to ask!

How did the folks in Capernaum *know* to discern Jesus as “one with authority bringing a new teaching” that was worth listening to? We, in our times, are surrounded by scams and scam artists. Hacks, hoaxes and hypocrites. Internet trolls and questionable “news sources.”

Was it different back then? I wonder.....

Was it, perhaps, about *Jesus* and not about the “new teaching” at all? We asked the question last week with Mallory: What was SO intriguing, so incredibly attractive about Jesus himself—his very *being*, character, spirit, that compelled those fishermen to drop *everything*—in a heartbeat—and follow him? To leave their livelihood; their families and friends.

Was it *who he was*—in the core of his being that *was* the message? Not his school of education, his credentials on paper, his portfolio, but who.he.was.—his true, God-given identity. His belovedness—celebrated and affirmed at his Baptism, before being sent into his calling *immediately*?

### III. WHAT HAS AUTHORITY?

How do we know legitimate, noteworthy authority when we see it? How do we deem what, or whom, is appropriate to give authority *to*? Even harder: what has authority in your life? What do you give truck to, credit with having some power over your life and times? Over your choices about how you live your life and spend your time?

What has authority over us—that which carries weight for us—might be the obvious things: family, community, country, origin, faith. What we might be *less* willing to admit is how much authority over us some bad habits or self-centered pursuits or prejudices hold. Or, what about anxieties, worries, fears? What do we allow to hold authority in our lives?

Jesus was said to “teach with authority”—a good and inspiring spirit. The other spirit that cried out, by contrast, was an “unclean or impure” spirit. Not an “evil spirit”—that’s something else. Not a demon as we have come to portray it – and certainly not a mental illness, as this character has been inappropriately portrayed down through the ages.

He or she is an “impure spirit” that *stirs* things up. That cries out in the middle of a meeting. Disrupts the status quo, pushes into the comfort zone of those gathered. But, lest this “spirit among us” get a totally bad rap, he is the first and so-far only voice to *recognize* Jesus! To give name to the Holy One of God.

This spirit—deemed unfit and not pure enough to be in the “in crowd” *sees* what others have as yet failed to see and comprehend.

How ironic that the first one in Mark’s gospel to recognize Jesus’ nature and true self is the one everyone else has deemed “unclean.”

Does that mean that the “Impure Spirit” is an authority on the holy identity of Jesus? Does it mean we’d better think of paying a little more attention to those voices outside the club?

#### **IV. AUTHORITY?**

Authority is a concept we struggle to define in helpful ways in our times. Did you twinge just a bit when you saw the title of the message for today, “**The Healing Authority?**”

For me, it conjures up images of stiff-looking men and women in suits (and stern hair buns of course!) showing up to investigate a situation—with clipboards in hand—like a Truant Officer or something of old, from the movies!

David Stendl-Rast and Phillip Gulley provide a good framework for getting our heads around authority and how we might look at this story from Jesus’ times and find wisdom for ours.

To begin with, there’s a difference between authority and authoritarianism. We tend to forget this to our peril. The word authority has *slid* a little in its common understanding, as we forget the root of “author” and the original definition of “a firm basis of knowing and acting.”

Doctors and lawyers or teachers are deemed “authorities” and granted authority because of their education and expertise in a certain area. They certainly don’t know *everything*, which we’ve all found out if a doctor has misdiagnosed us or missed something!

But then, there’s *authoritarianism*, and one can move across the line into that if not very carefully kept in check.

Says Gulley: “once people are given power to command, they [sometimes] hang on to that power even beyond their expertise. Then they become “authoritarian authorities” and keep themselves in that position by putting others down.

“Authoritarian authorities” hmmm!!! That’s a mouthful! It’s also something we need to watch for when that line gets crossed—in ourselves or in others—as we consider what and who we give weight to in our lives and allow to have authority over us.

And we do that, by “testing the fruits”, discerning the result of those whose actions and decisions we’re observing.

Gulley continues: “While genuine authority augments us and *builds us up*, authoritarian authority puts us down. The challenge to put to every leader and authority or proposed action is: Does it build others up or does it put them down.”

That’s the litmus test whenever we are “testing the spirits.” Wondering if a spirit is “unclean” in our midst? If a new idea or group decision is a good one or bad? Ask the question: “Does it build up the body?”

Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. (I Thess 5:11)

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. (Romans 14:19)

## **V. FIND OUR TRUE US**

### THE SAGE AND THE SCORPION

In India, there is a story about a kind, quiet man who would pray in the Ganges River every morning. One day after praying, he saw a poisonous **spider** struggling in the water and cupped his hands to carry it ashore. As he placed the spider on the ground, it stung him. Unknowingly, his prayers for the world diluted the poison.

The next day the same thing happened. On the third day, the kind man was knee deep in the river, and, sure enough, there was the spider, legs frantic in the water. As the man went to lift the creature yet again, the spider said, “Why do you keep lifting me? Can't you see I will sting you *every* time, because that is what I do.” And the kind man cupped his hands about the spider, replying, “Because that is what **I** do.”

Author Mark Nepo urges us to take a lesson from *this* story, as we discern what has authority in our lives, what our core identity is, and how we discern the spirits.

“There are many reasons to be kind, but perhaps none is as compelling as the spiritual fact that it is what we do. It is how the inner organ of being keeps pumping. Spiders sting. Wolves howl. Ants build small hills that no one sees. And human beings lift each other, no matter the consequence. Even when other beings sting.

As for us, if things fall, we will reach for them. If things break, we will try to put them together. If loved ones cry, we will try to soothe them—because that is what we do. I have often reached out, and sometimes it feels like a mistake. Sometimes, like the quiet man lifting the spider, I have been stung. But it doesn't matter, because that is what I do. That is what we do. It is the reaching out that is more important than the sting. In truth, I'd rather be fooled than not believe.”

## **VI. WHEN THE UNCLEAN SPIRITS HAUNT**

“It’s what we do.” “It’s who I am.” Discerning the spirits—in ourselves and others—deciding what or who to give credence to and what has ultimate authority for us—is a matter of looking on the heart. Looking for the real, authentic spirit that builds up rather than tears down.

That’s what Jesus exuded in spirit and carried out in action—healing love and compassion. His “new message” really wasn’t anything new. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Even with such a clear roadmap, unclean spirits reign among us and threaten to bring us down. Messages—often from within ourselves—haunt us, possess us, wake us in the night.

And when they do, we need Jesus to cast them out just as he did for the man in the synagogue. To confront that which seeks to destroy, tear down and leave us in tumult.

For God *so* loves us. God stands steadfastly against all those forces that are keeping us down. The Holy One is opposed to anything and everything that robs us of abundant life, and will

come to our aid—we need only cry out to Jesus. Seek healing grace.

I wonder if this has ever happened to you. Fears and worries that can be kept at bay during the day come to taunt me at night—showing up in my dreams, waking me with a jolt. Unclean spirits cry out with a loud voice when its quiet and the unconscious gets to have its say.

Last night that happened to me. Fears for a family member and his future threatened to derail me—from restful sleep and standing firmly on the promises that God is with us no matter what life brings.

I called out to God in my heart, and a friend appeared—a ministering angel. She sent words of scripture to hold onto; prayers of encouragement to counter the “impure spirit” that held me captive. Just like Jesus casting it out of the man in the synagogue, my troubled spirit was freed for that moment by God’s presence in the form of a friend’s presence and message.

Part of the message was this:

FRIEND: you've got this -- I am right here with you  
we are not isolated solitary beings on personal journeys  
- we are one body of Christ

“Only when we have known our own darkness well, can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion is a recognition of our shared humanity.” - P. Chodron

And these words of scripture appeared before me too:

“If the Lord had not been on our side, the storm would have engulfed us. The torrent would have swept over us.

So do not fear, for I am with you;

do not be dismayed, for I am your God.

I will strengthen you and help you;

I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

For God has not given us a spirit of fearfulness, but one of power, love, and sound judgment. Not a spirit of timidity, but of bravery, compassion and self-reflection. (2 Timothy 1:7)

## **VII. IMPURE SPIRITS AND AUTHORS**

Who’s your author? Who or what authors your life?

As we follow Jesus on the journey, we must ask this question continuously, looking to Jesus, “the author and perfecter or finisher of our faith (Hebrews 12:2)

We must discern the spirits. Looking for those that build up the body, have true God-given authority, and not just those who cry with a loud voice. Though, if they cry out and recognize the Holy in our midst, then paying attention to that voice is called for too.

And, we must help one another, building up the body of Christ, as we discern the spirits—encouraging each other to hear the voice of God when our ears are afraid, and to cast out that which is not of-God and not “who we truly are.” Both in our own souls and the soul of our community.

We have a “Healing Authority” in our midst.

I've come that they may have **life**, and have it **abundantly**. ..

We *are* the “healing authority,” with God, for and with one another. Thanks be to God. Amen.