

The Gospel at Work
Mark 1:21-28
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Wilton Presbyterian Church
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I want to talk about three aspects of the Gospel text this morning.

I wasn't here last week. I was in Darien at the First Congregational Church giving a talk on my book, "The Invisible Conversations with Your Aging Parents."

But lucky for you, our seminary intern, Nate Dove, was in the pulpit delivering a knock-your-socks-off sermon which ended with a rousing round of applause. If you haven't read it, do. I have made copies and put them on the credenza in the back. You can also find it online.

Nate preached about the early church and how it, like we face a similar issue...we have to find a new way of doing things if we're going to move forward and grow. Yes, the traditional ways are fine, but as members of the tradition of Reformed Tradition, we live by the phrase, "Reformed and always Reforming...or changed and always changing. Nate talked about how the mainline church, for the most part, is not attractive to the twenty-somethings and teens. We've known that for a long time. We've seen numbers across the country dwindle in mainline churches as older members die and don't find replenishment in numbers from those up and coming adults.

It was a sermon that only he, as a 23 year old, could give. But beyond that, I could tell in my reading of it, and just knowing Nate, that he spoke with authority. Not only did he know what he was talking about because of his vantage point as a 23 year old—which gave him a certain authority, but he also spoke with **spiritual authority**. The Spirit spoke in and through him, and as a result, you were touched.

I'll let you in on a little secret. Pastors who are in installed positions, oftentimes benefit from preachers who come in and give a prophetic sermon, like Nate gave. Those not in the pulpit every Sunday can often speak and be heard in a different way than those to whom we listen every week. So, thank you, Nate! Your message was important, and wouldn't have been heard in the same way, if I had preached those same words.

So the first point I want to make is that it is the job of the preacher to preach the life-giving, truth-telling, hope-imbuing, soul-convicting Gospel, and when that happens, we speak with spiritual authority. Jesus spoke with spiritual authority that morning in the temple, and all who heard him responded, *or reacted*.

Here's the thing, though, the preacher should **always approach the preaching ministry with humility**. Spiritual authority is NOT to be confused with arrogance, know-it-allness, let me tell you how to think and act. There are plenty of ancient and modern-day examples of that type of preacher. Stay away from them!! That's why it's extremely important to approach sermon preparation with great prayer. And believe me, I have come into the pulpit on most days not knowing if I am hitting the mark or not. And I may never know for sure, but that really isn't my business. I'm just called to pray, prepare and do my best. The rest is in God's hands.

The second point is the response to such authority.

How do you respond when you hear a message which might challenge you to live differently than you currently are?

I don't know about you, but there are times I may hear something and I know it to be truth, and my spirit sings and is uplifted. I know I am hearing truth...and I want to stand and follow and or change. That feels good, even if it may sting a bit.

But there are other times when I react differently. Catch me at a certain moment and touch me in a wrong way and my ego may blast back defensively either verbally or nonverbally with a, "Don't tell me what to do!" attitude. That's when I know I'm in trouble, and I need to take a closer look...something is going on. *It's called being convicted by the Spirit.* I'm most likely telling myself some lie about what I think I need or deserve...my pride has been pricked and blasts back... with some semblance of "how DARE you suggest something," but in reality what is being said is something which needs to be uncovered and changed, so I can be free to live more fully. When that happens, it's not always very pretty or even graceful. But it's pretty human. It may take moments or it may take days, but when I am able to go to others around me and admit my part in the breakdown, even ask for forgiveness, it is healing not only for me, but oftentimes for others too. That's the Gospel at work.

In our text this morning, we saw how the demon distorted the life of the man in the temple when confronted with the One who had Spiritual Authority. The ancient world view that attributes illness to unclean spirits, as in this story, bears some discussion. Although outdated medically, that world view does dramatize forces that wreak havoc within the individual, in communities, and even in countries – such as mental illness, addiction, sexual abuse, and racial hatred.

Perhaps we're in a moment on a national scale with the #metoo movement when the unclean spirits of the effects of the ills of sexual abuse, are being called out in our society. While the process is extremely painful for all involved, the calling out of the truth of the experience so many have held deep inside, some for decades, is helping healing occur. And it's not just among those victimized. Their stories need to be heard. I dare say, when the truth is finally unveiled, even those who have perpetrated such violence can begin to heal. There is a great saying which says, "We're as sick as our secrets." Something can't be healed unless it is brought out into the light. I believe even if it may take eons, grace will somehow come from all of this, and new life will emerge. That's the Gospel at work.

In the case of racial injustice, we who are white are still in the process of hearing from our brothers and sisters of color, how their experiences in life are vastly different than ours; For many of us, we continue to refuse to let their truth in...

The question is, when will we really listen and open our hearts to do anything about it?

My third and final point is what do we do when we are moved by the Spirit?

Going back to Nate's sermon, yes, we need to do things differently here. We need to be constantly widening our message of welcome and allowing those who come in our midst to change us. AND we need to KNOW that the message of the Gospel is powerful. We live in a world which constantly tells us we are not worthy, or we're only worthy if we live in this country, or if our kids go to those schools, or act this or that way—or if we're in this club or are friends with those people.

It takes a lot to peel back and discard those messages on our own. We need life in community to reaffirm what the Gospel message tells us. We all stand shoulder to shoulder before our loving God. None of that other stuff counts. That's why we go and serve at Manna House; that's why we have gone to Nicaragua to build houses; that's why we go and sit with people in early recovery from substance abuse...to remind them and us that we all stand equal before our loving God.

Some people here might be offended at times by my direct communiques. I've worked a long time to say what I mean, without saying it offensively. I don't mean to hurt people in the process. But I also pray that the Spirit will use my words for the good of all. My hope in speaking as honestly as I can is that spirits can be freed to live more fully.

Church, I love you. Jesus loves you, and we can do more. We can BE more. What are YOU going to do about it? How are YOU going to be moved this morning to be and do more for the sake of healing and love? We're not playing around here...the Gospel is straight forward. LOVE your neighbor. All neighbors. Forgive, heal, speak the truth, welcome.

A couple of weeks ago, when we met in the Parish Hall due to lack of heat, I challenged people to sign up for various committees...not only because we have lots of vacancies, but because we are all called to be active in community life of the church!

That morning, **one person signed the sheets**. Just because you've been a long-time member doesn't mean your days of serving are over. I've heard...it's time for the younger crowd to take over. That may be partially true, but they need to have institutional memory. They need to know about how our wonderful roots have led us to this point. They need to know why it is that you still come after all these years. So, you're not off the hook! If you're new, we need you too! God still has a ministry for you...Let's continue to be a part of seeing the Gospel at work!