

Mark 1:14-28 The Authority of Love
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama
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Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Follow me and I will make you fish for people.’ And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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, throwing him into convulsions 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.

When my brother, Todd, and I were kids, we argued. A lot. We would actively seek out things to argue about. I remember one time getting into a standoff over the name of the villain in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. I informed Todd that it was Simon Legree. He insisted that it was *Sam* Legree. Back and forth we went, until I finally

went to my room, grabbed the book, and marched back into the living room pointing triumphantly at the page. There it was, in black and white: “Simon Legree.”

Todd looked at it and said, “Huh. What do you know: a typo.”

Neither of us cared about what the actual name was. What we cared about was being right, because being right would give us an edge of authority over the other.

Being right, though, is not how “authority” is depicted in our scripture passages. In Deuteronomy, the authority of a prophet comes from speaking the word of God—and not claiming God said things that God never did. So in this case, authority comes from honesty and from accountability to God.

And in 1 Corinthians, Paul is writing to a group of people just as caught up in adolescent contests of rightness as my brother and I were. Paul tells them to drop it. One of the arguments in the Corinthian church was about whether it was permissible to eat meat that had been sacrificed to other gods, and then sold at the marketplace. Paul knows that there’s nothing wrong with this meat. After all, since other gods don’t actually exist, they can’t contaminate it. But he also knows that there are other Christians, still uncertain in their faith, who would be so shaken by seeing a fellow believer eating such meat that they might lose their faith entirely—so, he says, don’t imperil *their* souls over your need to be right!

He took his own advice, by the way. This was the same Paul who had stepped forward to convince the church in Jerusalem that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised in order to be part of the church; yet, when he and Timothy were going to evangelize a community of Jews, he made a point of having Timothy circumcised first, so that *that* wouldn’t become a stumbling block for *them*. For

Paul, relationship was more important than rightness. Of course, Timothy might have wished there were a different way to demonstrate that!

And now, we come to Jesus' first sermon in Mark. He's been baptized, he's spent forty days in the wilderness, and now, he heads off to the synagogue in Capernaum, picking up disciples along the way with his call to repent and believe the good news of God's coming reign.

And there, in the synagogue, when he begins to teach, the crowd responds with astonishment, because "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." *Ouch*, if you're a scribe!

As the theologian Matthew Myer Boulton points out, "the word Mark uses here for "authority" is *exousia*, a close cousin of the word that eventually ends up in the Nicene Creed to indicate "substance" or "being" or "essence." Jesus speaks and acts from his essence. What he says, what he does, and who he is are all one and the same: he is "the Holy One of God," the one who has come to heal and liberate the world."¹

Jesus didn't head to Capernaum to show off his knowledge. He went there because John had been arrested. That arrest was the attempt of the powers-that-be to shut down the spread of God's liberating good news—so when Jesus showed up to preach that same message, everyone knew that he wasn't spouting empty words. It took a lot of guts to keep that message going, with John already behind bars. Jesus was putting his whole life on the line to bring the good news to *them*. *That* was speaking with authority.

¹ Matthew Myer Boulton, <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-epiphany-week-4>

And that authority drew out the demon. The demon was possessing the young man, even there in that place of worship, in the same way that the values of the empire were possessing and holding captive the people of Israel. The same way that, today, the demons of racism and white supremacy hold our whole culture captive, even within the church.²

Then, as now, there were demons twisting the souls and the actions of human beings into something they weren't made to be; and when someone who was *exactly* as he was made to be spoke God's liberating truth with his whole being--with *authority*--it brought all the demons surging out in opposition, because nothing threatens them more.

Or maybe one other thing does: and that thing is love. Because when the demon spoke through the voice of that young man, Jesus never stopped seeing the person behind the demon. He didn't move to destroy the man—he moved to cast out the demon, so the man could be freed.

This week, our government acknowledged the looming threat of domestic terrorism. It's about time. That demon has been howling for years—surging over Charlottesville; massacring worshippers in synagogues and churches and mosques; choking the life out of Black men in broad daylight; gunning down High School students in Parkville, and Breonna Taylor in her own home. The demons of hatred and white supremacy are alive and well, and possessing the bodies of relatives and friends, as well as law enforcement and politicians and faithful church members all over this country.

² Ibid.

So what kind of authority does it take to cast them out? It takes more than spouting a bunch of facts. Facts—no matter how right they are--never changed anyone's heart.

The kind of authority that's needed is the authority Jesus had—the authority that comes from speaking from our own essence—with integrity—even when it puts us in danger.

And it means speaking with love. That may be the hardest part of all. I know my first impulse is to meet contempt with contempt, hatred with hatred, dehumanization with dehumanization. But that just feeds the demons.

Jesus looked past the demon, and loved the man. Like Bryan Stevenson, who said, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done,”³ Jesus knew that the man was more than the vitriol that was coming out of his mouth; more than the forces that had a grip on his soul. He knew that the man was not the demon, but the demon's captive. And so, he called the demon out, and set the man free.

Now, I'm not Jesus, and you're not Jesus. Each of us has our own demons that we contend with every day. But we can still speak with authority by speaking with honesty about that, because denial just gives the demons more power.

Still, we do need to speak. We can't let the demons run amok without calling them out—even if they're speaking through the mouths of our closest friends.

But we also can't try to act like we've got all the answers, because we don't, and they know it.

³ Bryan Stevenson in *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*

We have to begin by acknowledging that we've got a long way to go, too. That humility, right there, disempowers our own demons. And when we speak not just with honesty, but with love, that disarms the demons in others.

At least, that's how it worked for Jesus.

This is no Pollyana messenger—"just be nice to everyone, and everyone will be nice back." No, remember that, even as Jesus freed the one man, there were other listeners there who left with their souls still captive, and who went on to set the trap for Jesus' arrest and execution.

So, there's that. It is still the case that the prophets of liberation and love often get themselves killed. But in the meantime, they also shake themselves free from the demon of fear that wanted to silence them.

So, we may not be Jesus, but we are Jesus' people. We are the man in the synagogue whose soul was freed. We know the saving power of God's word. We know that, ultimately, no demon can withstand the authority of God's love, and that nothing can overcome its power—not even death.

So let's speak up to the demons, and let's love the folks behind them—because that's how we were loved, and that's how we were freed.