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The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

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Jesus Teaches Us with Authority

We live in a world of information overload, much of it packed with personal opinion. Pundits and prophets disagree and we struggle to know what to believe. We have come to trust Jesus. He teaches truths that matter in our lives and that mean something for eternity.

First Reading

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

A promised prophet who speaks the words of God.

Second Reading

Hebrews 3:1-6

Christ is the faithful teacher of all God's people.

Gospel

Mark 1:21-28

The teacher who teaches with authority.

Sermon

Mark 1:21-28

Introduction: I was a teacher for 45 years. For the first ten I taught catechism classes and Bible classes. For the next 35 I taught in seminary classrooms. I always thought I was pretty much in control. I could walk the aisles, raise my voice, and wave my arms around. I could see students fidget when they were bored and I could see their interest when they were engaged. I could catch them dozing or doing work for other classes. Then came Covid-19. The classrooms shut down and virtual learning took over. All my students saw of me was my face and all I saw of them were their faces. It was lousy teaching and lousy learning.

The whole educational world is struggling with this right now. Can virtual teaching do what face-to-face teaching can do? Most experts say it can't. Computers are wonderful but they can't do everything. The real concern is that students are falling behind in their education. And no one knows they'll make up what they lose.

Jesus didn't begin his ministry by dying on the cross or breaking out of an empty tomb. He started his ministry as a teacher. People asked him questions and he answered them. They followed him as he walked from town to town and he stopped to explain things to them. He worshiped in the local synagogues and stood up to speak. That's what he was doing in the gospel for today. How did the people react? Mark mentions it twice: **The people were amazed at his teaching.**

It can happen to us that we get ourselves into a virtual learning situation with Jesus. All we see is his face, and we've all seen that face before. We don't hear the excitement in his voice; we don't see the fire in his eyes. He doesn't move around or wake us up if we're dozing. The teachings of Jesus can become just words to us, words we read on a page or words someone reads to us. We need to be sure that our learning from this teacher remains face-to-face and heart-to-heart. We need to remember how amazing his teachings are. The Gospel for today from Mark chapter 1 leads us to this encouragement:

Listen Up! Jesus Has Something to Say

1. So Jesus and his fishermen friends are on the move, and Jesus is going to show them how to fish for people. They head for Capernaum up on the north side of the Sea of Galilee. It's kind of Jesus' base of operations. Mark tells us that **when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach.** Jesus wasn't the official teacher in the Capernaum synagogue. The appointed rabbi would lead the prayers, read Old Testament scriptures, and deliver a sermon. The worshipers listened. At the end of the service, the men could stand and speak. That's what Jesus did.

So what happened? Mark tells us: **The people were amazed at his teaching.** What do you think made Jesus so amazing? Well, he probably was a really good preacher. I mean, he was the Son of God after all! His voice didn't sound like he always had a cold, he never looked down at his notes, and he never used bad grammar. His progression of thought was perfect, everyone could hear what he said, and nobody dozed off. It seems like Jesus grabbed your attention and didn't let go.

But what really made Jesus so amazing to these people was that **he taught as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.** So what did the teachers of the law teach? Well, they taught the law. They taught the law of Moses—that's the Ten Commandments and the hundreds of other laws God gave Israel at Mt. Sinai. They taught the laws of the Jewish theologians, and they taught the traditions of the fathers. Their objective was to make the people better Jews. The better you obeyed the laws, the rabbis taught, the better Jew you were, and the better Jew you were, the closer to God you got. To make their case and prove their point, the rabbis quoted the law and the theologians and the traditions over and over and over again. Their teaching was bad, boring, and burdensome. People didn't leave the synagogue in an upbeat mood with a smile on their faces.

Mark doesn't tell us what Jesus taught on this particular day, but it isn't hard to figure out. Jesus taught the law, too, but he taught what the law really meant. He taught that the law revealed sins and that their sins condemned the people before God. Jesus taught that the way to God was not by obeying the law, but by repenting of their sins and believing the good news. Jesus wasn't interested in ancient history; he looked ahead. A new kingdom had arrived, he said, the kingdom of God, and the king of this kingdom offered forgiveness and peace and hope. Jesus didn't need to quote Moses or the fathers or the traditions. He didn't need someone to back him up. He said, **You have heard that it was said to the people long ago...but I say to you.** Jesus was the ultimate authority because he came from God.

There are a lot of really good preachers around these days. You can drive around and hear some of them right here in Mequon. They're live streaming their sermons on Sunday mornings. The best ones sponsor web sites that feature their excellent sermons. You can read their sermons, too. You can find their books on shelves in grocery stores; Hobby Lobby features them prominently. They're all-over Christian Radio. I don't know if you're interested or not, but millions of people are. I'll tell you something: In almost every case these popular preachers are teachers of the law. Their goal is to help you become better husbands, better wives, better parents, and better givers. They'll teach you sure-fire methods to get past your failures, to get out of debt, and to get on with life. Do this, they say, and you'll be a better Christian, and if you're a better Christian you'll get closer to God.

People are amazed at these preachers, and maybe some of us are, too. They make people feel like a million bucks. People are always ready to be better than we were before—until we fail. When anger or jealousy or selfishness turn us back into bad husbands and bad wives and bad parents again. When the methods to avoid failures and debts don't work, when prayer doesn't make sickness go away, when trying hard only produces feeling bad, when the rush of victory turns into crushing guilt.

This is why we need face-to-face learning with Jesus. Half the image doesn't work. **We need to listen up because Jesus has something to say.** Jesus teaches us that living better begins with repenting every day. It means being honest about what we do wrong and struggling to do right. It means failing and succeeding again and again. Jesus teaches us that living better starts with him. He lived better in our place; his perfect life covered our failures in the sight of God. Jesus teaches us that our life on earth begins with his death on the cross. We live in peace and contentment because God doesn't hold anything against us anymore. Jesus carried our sins instead. Jesus teaches us that our victorious life starts with his victory over his tomb. We draw on his victory and his power to beat down the devil, say no to temptation, live our lives in love for one another, and long for that place where teaching will end because we will know all things in eternal perfection.

2. The words of those Capernaum worshipers were still echoing around the room. **Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”** If that would have happened in one of our churches, we’d be absolutely petrified. But it’s likely that some of them had seen this before; demon possession wasn’t an absolute shock for them. What was a shock was that the spirit who took over this man confessed Jesus as the Son of God. What was a bigger shock was what happened next: **Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.**

It would have been interesting to watch the body language of the people right at this point: all standing up, eyes like saucers, hands on their heads, turning and talking to one another. **The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, “What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him.”**

That’s the thing about Jesus’ teaching—his teaching actually changes things. He started teaching in Palestine and never had more than 500 followers. Over 2,000 years his teachings have drawn billions of followers, many of whom changed the world. His teachings turned pagans into Christians, haters into lovers, and murderers into missionaries. He protected and preserved his teachings even when churchmen challenged them and tyrants tried to tear them down. We spend way too much time thinking about the failures of Christianity, failures invariably caused by weak or erring Christians. We need to spend more time considering the successes of Christianity which have been won because of Jesus, the master teacher.

Take a look at your own life. Lots of debts and doubts and disappointments, for sure. But consider how the teachings of Jesus have changed you. You come to this house of worship (when the weather allows it!) again and again to hear teachings you have heard before. Even as Covid deters you, you long to return to church to hear what Jesus teaches and tells you. You are willing to make hard decisions that impact the future of your congregation and the work of the kingdom. You study the teachings of Jesus at home and in Bible classes. You put your head on your pillow at night and pray “Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” You pray that way because Jesus has taught you to pray that way.

Listen up! Jesus has something to say. He speaks with the authority as God from God and Light from light. He speaks with love as the one who became truly human for us. He speaks with authority about things that matter in life and in death. He speaks with authority and proves the power of his preaching. Stop, look, and listen, brothers and sisters. Your teacher has something to say and he says it to you. Amen.