

January 28, 2018

TEXT: Mark 1:21–28

TITLE: Public Witness

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

A woman brought her son to see Gandhi. The mother was worried that her son was obsessed with sugar, but she had not had any luck getting her son to cut back on sweets. So she said, “Gandhi, my son consumes too much sugar. Can you tell him that it is bad for his health?” Gandhi listened to her plea, but rather than honoring her request, he told her to come back with her son in two weeks. The mother was confused and disappointed, but she did what he asked and returned two weeks later. When she brought her son before Gandhi he told the boy that he should try to cut back on sweets, as too much sugar was bad for his health. The mother pulled Gandhi aside and asked why he didn’t just give that advice to the boy earlier—why had he made them come back two weeks later? Gandhi replied, “Two weeks ago I had an obsession with sugar. I needed the two weeks to see if I could cut back myself.”¹

Gandhi knew that his words and his actions needed to align in order for his teachings to be more than simply lip service. Gandhi had a sense that who he was was more than his words—if his words were going to hold up, he needed to practice what they preached. His witness would only have authority if he could adhere to his own advice.

Our gospel lesson for today raises the question of authority for those first encountering Jesus. Out of the starting gate, Mark is clear to paint a portrait of Jesus so that the readers can see who Jesus is and what he is about. And though Mark doesn’t mince words or add much flourish he is quite clear—Jesus is the Holy One of God with the power to heal, redeem, and make all things new. Mark’s succinct style has a sense of urgency about it. He cuts to the chase. And in just eight short verses, Mark tells us not just about Jesus’ experience in the temple that day. He tells us exactly what we can expect from Jesus’ ministry, and what God is doing through him. One commentator writes: “This gospel doesn’t devote energy toward establishing a clear Christology, an understanding of Jesus’ nature(s). Instead, Mark depicts Jesus as the one uniquely authorized, commissioned, or empowered to declare and institute the reign of God.”²

Another commentator puts it like this:

(In Mark) Jesus reveals a boundary breaking God...Each and every boundary we try to put in place, we think is in place, even that which we perceive as impenetrable, God bursts through. Political, social, religious, ethic, racial, sexual, gendered, cosmic, even if we are honest, the final boundary we persist in thinking is beyond God’s ability to shatter—death.

¹ <http://www.aboundlessworld.com/gandhi-and-the-sugar-story/>

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2343

As a result, (she argues) Jesus the Exorcist seems the only logical first ministry act for Jesus in Mark—not a sermon, not a miracle, not even a healing. But stepping into the realm of opposing supremacies, the world of other spirits, the potent power of possession and saying, “*God is here.*”³

Our story opens with Jesus and his disciples in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Although he is not a scribe nor Pharisee, Jesus is teaching—as one *with authority*, we are told. And his teachings amaze those who hear him. A man approaches him who is possessed by a demon. The demon speaks, identifying Jesus as the Holy One of God, and within moments Jesus casts out the demon. Those who were with them in the synagogue were amazed once more. We learn right away that not only does Jesus teach with authority—as one who knows and understands God, but he has the authority even to cast out demons. *The Spirit of God has dominion over the unclean spirit, and the man is made whole again.*

In this story, Jesus can be believed because Jesus’ words are backed by his actions. Jesus’ public witness is consistent—his words and his deeds mirror one another and point hearers to the same conclusion. Mark never tells us what Jesus says when he taught that day. But still, the message is clear: God’s kingdom has come. God is making all things new. The kingdom of God has more power than the struggles that consume us or the demons that possess us. In Jesus God offers liberation for the oppressed, healing for the sick, welcome for the outcast, forgiveness for the sinner.

Mark wants to remind us that no matter who lays claim to worldly authority—no matter who’s in charge of the government, who manages wealth, or who commands armies—God’s authority is reigns supreme. Jesus is the one whose amazing authority makes all things new.

This was good news when Jesus showed up in the temple that day. Certainly it was a relief for the man from whom Jesus cast out demons. It was a relief to those who watched and heard because they knew that God wasn’t done with God’s people yet. God broke in in exciting ways and said loud and clear that God cared for those who were on the margins. God desired wholeness for those broken in body, mind or spirit. God’s vision was one in which a fractured community came together and the outcast were welcomed as friend.

This message is good news for us today. When we wake up all tied up in knots because life isn’t going according to plan, it is a comfort to know in Christ God untangles those knots so that we can feel whole. Jesus reminds us that the one with the most power in the universe is benevolent and loving. God is concerned for the most vulnerable and desires that we all are made whole.

We need this message. We need to reorient our lives around its truth. Our public discourse on power lately has been shaped by stories of those with power victimizing

³ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3511>

the vulnerable, even as it has been shaped by stories of resistance. Last Sunday's headlines were bookended by the government shutdown and the Women's March. Those walking Hollywood red carpets have been donning black dresses, a reminder of the #metoo movement and the fact that allegations continue to pour forth naming Hollywood elites.

It has been hard to envision a brand of authority lately that invests in the welfare of the vulnerable. It's been hard to think of someone with power who has used their platform to care for the needs of the needy. It seems like it's been too long since we've heard a message outside of these walls that all are equal in God's sight. And then as a society we shake our heads when another teenager brings a gun to school because we didn't model a different way.

But Jesus invites us into a different conversation. He models a way for us to make sure that our words and our deeds line up with God's kingdom. By God's grace, he shows us how it's done. Jesus invites us to dismantle systems of oppression and to care for one another's basic needs. Jesus invites us to partner and proclaim a Gospel of gracious love that affirms the worth of the least and the lost in the world's eyes—and a reminder that God gazes upon all of God's people with deep love.

What does this mean for us?

Well, it is an invitation to step up. We are called to not just SAY that all are loved—we need to live like it. We need to be intentional that our actions line up with the beliefs we profess—when we're stuck in traffic, when we're talking with someone who doesn't think like we do, when we are at work, at home, and in line at the grocery store.

It means that we are called not only to private discourse but to public witness—to call it like we see it and to live it like we believe it in the public realm that all might know the love and justice of Christ.

It means there is hope. When we are weary or discouraged we do not need to give up. God is God and God's vision is that all will be well and know new and abundant life.

It means that we are not alone. We go about this kingdom work with the power of God behind us and within us, with the authority of the gospel at our fingertips, with the strength of community around us, and with courage filled with love propelling us onward that all may know the goodness of God and the promise of God's saving love.

May it be so. May God's love be known through us.

Thanks be to God.