

Good very cold Sunday morning from a hill in Rockport.....

“Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” These words attributed to Helen Keller came to me this morning as gratefulness.org's “word for the day.” Last Sunday my focus was on mercy. This morning it is on the authority of words.

The Bible tells us Jesus was a master in his use of words, in the power of his touch, in the authority he took from God. Many of us today (in this time of history in the making) are struggling with losses of all kinds, fears about the future, grief and joy all mixed up together within ourselves and for our loved ones. Maybe it's just me, but my guess is many of you who make the choice to read my meditations are experiencing the same complex feelings.

For that reason, this coming week, perhaps longer, I would like to reflect from the writings of C. S. Lewis in his book *A Grief Observed*, Frederick Buechner in his book *A Crazy, Holy Grace, the Healing Power of Pain and Memory*, and Forrest Church in his book *Love and Death, My Journey Through the Valley of the Shadow*.

A quote from Buechner's fictional character Godric says, “What's lost is nothing to what's found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup.” These fictional words seem profoundly similar and related to Helen Keller's words, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of overcoming it.” I draw great strength from the authority of these words.... Can you?

I know I've said this before, **AND** I want to say again how much I appreciate all your responses to my meditations, especially in these challenging times. I don't always get a chance to respond to each of your reflections, **AND** please know I read all of them, ponder them, and give thanks for them.... Your support spurs me on and gives me hope for the future of us all....

Blessings to each one on this fifth Sunday of the new year..... Susan

p.s. I will ATTEMPT to download today's scripture reading and sermon to my Facebook page later today: [freerangepastor](https://www.facebook.com/freerangepastor) for anyone who wants to tune in.... and I believe Margie is also downloading my sermons to Federated's Facebook page.... Sorry I couldn't get last Sunday's offering downloaded this week!

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, January 31, 2021
as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**

A Call to Worship

Teaching God, you call us to follow in the path of Jesus,
who speaks and acts with authority.
Help us to follow his teachings this day,
motivated by our knowledge of your assuring presence among us.
Let us worship God, together in spirit, if not in body this day.
Amen.

Psalm 111

For consideration before reading the Psalm:

“The season following the Epiphany gives space to reflect on the nature of God in community, without the temptation to translate this into a congregational call for watchfulness (Advent) or penitence (Lent). This is an invitation for [us] to explore what we often find to be the paradoxical qualities of God’s immanence and transcendence. Psalm 111 gives [us] a rendering of God’s character that is both immanent and transcendent. The rhythm of this text allows us an opportunity to reflect on those traits both in majesty and in our immediate experience. This then allows us to be open to a broader reflection on how that movement between immanence and transcendence translates into a framework for relationship with our communities. The same God who is both above and within is also named as a God palpably present and engaged within the faith community.” (Elizabeth C. Knowlton, in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1*)

Psalm 111 with a people’s response...

*Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

People: We give thanks to God for all that we live and breath
in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them.

People: We cherish the sacred words we come to study and appreciate
in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever.

People: We wonder at the awesomeness of God’s work and seek to understand
God’s righteousness in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the Lord is gracious and merciful.

People: We appreciate God’s deeds and remember God’s grace and
forgiving nature in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant.

People: We are fed by God's word as we stand in awe and hope for
God's never-ending teaching in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

*He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the
nations.*

People: We receive God's governing and long to experience its sacred fruits
in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

People: We strive to be true to God's faithfulness and justice and depend on
God's promises in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

*They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and
uprightness.*

People: We begin again this day to live out God's command to us and stand tall in
our faith
in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

*He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.*

People: We are forgiven of our mistakes and called to renew our faith in God's
covenant
in the midst of this gathered body in spirit.

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it
have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.*

People: We seek to understand God's word as we stand in awe of God and do our
best again and again to live out God's word in the midst of this gathered body in
spirit.

We praise God this day and always. Amen.

Readings of Scripture – Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he [Jesus] 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.

“A new teaching – with authority!” or “the unclean spirit”
A sermon based on Mark 1:21-28

Will you pray with me. God of this teaching moment, and all the teaching moments to come, help us to recognize the “unclean spirits” within us that sometime prevent us from following your call. Teach us how to tune into those who speak with true authority and knowledge of you. Help us to tune out the latest sound bites that try to grab our attention and yet leave us with nothing to chew on. Mold us into the people you would have us be this day, O God. Amen.

Mark’s story about Jesus is told differently than in the other three Gospels. Most everything in Mark’s Gospel happens “immediately.” The story is told as if Jesus knows he only has a year, or maybe three at the most, to accomplish what he’s come to do. So he’s gotta act FAST continually!

Jesus begins his ministry in Capernaum, as our passage for today states. He begins his ministry on the Sabbath – what better day to start the challenging work of spreading the good news of God’s grace, healing and wisdom among those so in need of receiving that grace, healing and wisdom – then... as now... Between pandemic pandemonium, Super Bowl frenzy and political boxing matches, we’re hard pressed to find words of grace, healing and wisdom each day. But we have to keep searching for them, don’t we? Isn’t that one of the reasons we come to church, whether in person or in cyberspace, each Sunday?

Our passage for this morning leaves me with three questions that I’ve been pondering all week – first, what is true authority for us today; second, what are the “unclean spirits” that invade our world and our individual lives; and third, how do we wash those “unclean spirits” *out* of our lives so we can hear the authority of God *in* our lives?

First, what is true authority? The parishioners who first heard Jesus in the synagogue proclaimed that he “taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” (Mk 1:22) We have to remember that “the scribes” of Jesus’ day “were more than copyists or secretaries. Spiritual descendants of ‘Ezra the scribe’ (Neh 8:1, 4; 12:26, 36), they were honored for their function of reading and interpreting the Scriptures. [In our time, I might be considered a “scribe.”] The scribes were the doctors of the law, the authorized biblical scholars of their time. Mark [in our

passage for today], distances Jesus from the scribes in a way that will later blossom into conflict.”^[1]

The text says Jesus “taught them as one having authority...” (Mk 1:22) “A new teaching – with authority!” (Mk 1:27) What IS authority? “Authority can mean either the right or the power to do something or both. [Biblical commentators tell us], although Jesus’ teaching was undoubtedly powerful, his right to speak is underscored by the contrast between his teaching and that of the scribes. They taught with *erudition* [that’s scholarship and education], but Jesus taught with authority. Jesus interprets the Scripture as one who has the right to say what it means. Furthermore, his teaching has no need of external support, whether from Scripture or elsewhere; his word is self-authenticating, not like that of the scribes.”^[2] In other words, the scribes taught from book learning, Jesus taught from God hearing. I preach with footnotes, Jesus didn’t.

So authority can be book or law based, or it can be God based. The trick, the challenge... is in perceiving which is which. Some preachers today speak *as if* their words are God based, but their message is based on *a literal interpretation* of words of Scripture written two thousand years ago... words that may or may not have been accurately translated, and may or may not have anything to do with many aspects of our lives today.

Speaking with authority is a tricky thing... whose authority? Our own, based on the number of letters behind our names that indicate how many scholarly degrees we have, based on a religious insignia added to the beginning of our names, as in “the Reverend Doctor...,” or based on the holy, wildly unmanageable, not-to-be-pinned-down authority of God? Our text for today says the scribes spoke with the former... Jesus spoke with the latter. This was a big deal back then. It’s still a big deal. Do we hear *the voice of Jesus* in our teachers and preachers or do we hear book learning based on the philosophy and theology of a particular school of religious learning? It’s very hard to tell, isn’t it?

For some, Jesus, taught as the only Son of God, is the most powerful, authoritative figure in human and holy history. For others, Jesus, taught as the Son of Man, kin to all of us, fellow traveler on the way to eternity, is a far more authoritative figure in our spiritual lives.

Jesus taught with authority from God, not as the scribes who taught from book learning, no matter how holy they might have believed themselves to be. It’s not hard to understand how much Jesus was upsetting a lot of sacred apple carts back then. He’s still upsetting them now!

My second pondering for this week was about these “unclean spirits.” Our passage for this morning says, “Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an **unclean spirit**...” (Mk 1:23) What are “unclean spirits”? Bible commentators tell us “unclean spirit, evil spirit, and demon are used synonymously in Mark; that is, they have the same *denotation* but different *connotations*. [Denotation means “basic meaning or significance.” Connotation means “implication or suggestion or undertone.”] Unclean (or evil) spirit connotes ritual impurity, while demon connotes satanic power. Unclean or evil is a translator’s choice, and each is open to misunderstanding. In this context, “unclean” does not mean physically dirty, and evil does not mean morally depraved. All three terms *denote* an invisible spiritual being, neither human nor divine, alienated from and hostile to God. ‘Holy One of God’ is what the unclean spirit, speaking through the man [in our passage for today], calls Jesus... in a strong sense affirming Jesus’ unique relationship to God... Without defining his nature or precise relationship to God, the demons recognize Jesus and tremble.”^[3] This happens several times in the Scriptures... those alienated from and hostile to God recognize the holy, the sacred... much sooner than those who believe they are closer to God to begin with. I’m always more nervous around people who think they have God down pat and believe they know what’s in the mind of God.

There is something to be learned from “unclean spirits.” They can help us turn around and look again at matters in life we thought we understood, but don’t really... If we give ourselves the time and energy to consider the matters again, “unclean spirits” in our world and in our individual lives can help us “come clean” and give us the opportunity to “start over” again and again... because if you’re like me, my “unclean spirits” keep popping up – like when I say under my breath, and sometimes not under my breath, “THOSE PEOPLE... are religious nuts!” or “THOSE PEOPLE don’t understand what I understand about democracy!” or “THOSE PEOPLE are too ignorant to live!” Sorry, your pastor has some “unclean spirits” within her! Being alienated from and hostile to God are not just for THOSE PEOPLE. At one time or another, or perhaps many times in our lives, I believe we’re all filled with “unclean spirits” that God would rather we not have.

Maybe the parishioners who heard Jesus in the Capernaum synagogue as he called the “unclean spirit” to come out of the man were beginning to admit something to themselves. Maybe they had their own “unclean spirits” within them that were making them a little nervous. Jesus came with a NEW authority, not like the authority of the scribes, and called “unclean spirits” to task. In the same

moment perhaps he was calling all the people of his day to task, just as he calls us to task... for our thoughts, our words, our deeds that are less than holy, less than gracious, less than compassionate for those around us – alienated from and hostile to God.

This leads me to my third pondering for this week... how do we wash those “unclean spirits” *out* of our lives so we can hear the authority of God *in* our lives? If we were together in person this morning, I’d ask you for your answers to that question.

To be honest, I’m struggling with this question. In the midst of all the angst and anger and harsh rhetoric and meanspiritedness that surrounds us in the news day in and day out, I’m hard-pressed to find the right soap to wash the “unclean spirits” out of my own heart and mind, let alone trying to help others wash them out of theirs. Maybe we all need a little more “Dove soap” and a little less “Lava soap” in our lives... a little more soft soap in our words and a little less harshness in our tone when we speak *of* others and *to* one another. I know I can’t *make* this happen in others, but at least I can try to make it happen *within myself*. How about you? Can we focus more on the *authority of Jesus* in our lives and less on our own *unclean spirits*?

Let the people say, “Amen.”

To hold in our prayers this day.....

And hold in your prayers all those affected by the coronavirus and the families of those who have died from the virus....

And all those families affected by the use of addictive drugs and alcohol among their members....

And all those who have worked tirelessly for the building and rebuilding of our nation into one people, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.....

And pray for our new President, and Congress, that they might do the right things in office for the betterment and future of all of us.....

And add to our prayers, **Mike Sodano, who has had three-way bypass surgery this week, a friend of Mimi’s and known to many in Thomaston**, extended family members of Sandra Caron who all have the covid virus – Allie in Maryland, and Dan and his wife and stepson in Buffalo, NY; “Cody,” who doesn’t live locally but needs prayers for guidance; and continued prayers for Hank Cary, Ed Lee, Enid, Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant, Sally Harjula,

Elliot, Trish Perry, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty, George Ng, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and Michael and Gail in southern Maine,

Please send me the names of those you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday.....

AND those you would like for me to remove from this list.

A Benediction

*May God bless you and keep you.
May God's face radiate upon you
and flood you with grace and tender mercies.
May God smile upon you always
and cover your life with peace.
Amen.*

Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary)

For Sunday, February 7, 2021

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-30

Words to ponder today about "authority".....

"Authority without wisdom is like a heavy axe without an edge, fitter to bruise than polish." ~ Anne Bradstreet

"Nothing strengthens authority so much as silence." ~ Leonardo da Vinci

"Moral authority comes from following universal and timeless principles like honesty, integrity, treating people with respect." ~ Stephen Covey

"By ensuring that no one in government has too much power, the Constitution helps protect ordinary Americans every day against abuse of power by those in authority." ~ John Roberts

"I love quotation because it is a joy to find thoughts one might have, beautifully expressed with much authority by someone recognized wiser than oneself." ~ Marlene Dietrich

"Because power corrupts, society's demands for moral authority and character increase as the importance of the position increases." ~ John Adams

[1]Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983, p. 50.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., p. 50-51.