

A NEW TEACHING
Sermon for Epiphany 4B-Mk 1:21-28
LPC, 1/28/18

A story that appeared on the front page of the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* last Thursday reported that “the US faces ‘an unprecedented crisis of trust’ as a growing number of Americans are unwilling to put their faith in their government, media, businesses and other institutions.” The report comes from Edelman, “a leading global public relations firm.” In corroboration, the authors of the story also cited Nir Kossovsky, a spokesman for a firm that assesses business risks and Philip English, a former Republican Congressman. Mr. English was reported to have said that the days when most of the country considered a single news source like Walter Cronkite authoritative are gone in the current climate where news sources are often linked to a particular ideology.

This state of affairs seems a very far remove from the scene described in this morning’s Gospel reading from Mark, where Jesus’ authority is instantly acknowledged after Jesus follows up a teaching session in the synagogue with an apparent exorcism: “They were *all* amazed, and they kept asking on asking one another, ‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority!’” (Italics mine.)

I can’t help hearing this text somewhat wistfully, wishing that there was some benevolent authority that could be generally recognized today. But nobody seems to have the same opinion as anybody else these days. It is true that a majority of Americans continue to identify as Christians, but there seems to be no universal authority on what being a Christian means anymore.

What is it about Jesus that convinces Jesus’ audience, on this occasion described today, that Jesus is authoritative, in contrast to the teachers they have known in the past? It is significant that although the audience comments on Jesus’ *teaching* being authoritative, what seems to convince them is Jesus’ *action*, in overcoming the unclean spirits. It appears that what they observe Jesus *doing* gives authority to what Jesus has *taught*.

Now what has Jesus taught? Mark does not tell us specifically. In fact, this story occurs so early in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus has had only two recorded speeches so far. To infer what Jesus was teaching in the synagogue in this particular instance we have no alternative than to refer to his previous pronouncements.

So what has Jesus said so far? Jesus has come to Galilee, proclaiming “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” And he has called the disciples from the shores of the Galilean Sea, saying, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” So presumably Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue is along the same lines: that the kingdom of God prophesied of old is near, that the appropriate response is repentance and belief, that this is good news, and that it concerns involving people.

How was this teaching new? Prophets had been preaching the Day of the Lord for centuries, advising repentance and belief, and suggesting that God’s people may be a light to the nations. A closer reading of those prophets indicates a connection between the Day of the Lord

and the arrival of justice and vindication for the poor. We may infer that Jesus' teaching followed these lines, with an added sense of urgency: "The kingdom of God is near!" Not somewhere off in the nebulous future, but more immediate than we realize.

So the message is largely the same as that which has already been preached by many before Jesus, but there are two new elements. First is a heightened sense of immediacy. Secondly, Jesus accompanies the teaching with a healing.

This is the first of Jesus' healings recorded in the Gospel of Mark. Before this first chapter is over, Jesus will have conducted countless more healings. His reputation as a healer will have spread so much that he cannot go about openly any more. Before the second chapter of Mark's Gospel is over Jesus will draw an explicit connection between physical healing and the forgiveness of sins.

Now, with the benefit of later knowledge, we readers today already know that Jesus has authority because Jesus is the Son of God. Of course he has authority not only over people and nature but also over the world of spirits, good and evil. But what was it, in the moment described by Mark, which testified to this truth in Jesus' own day?

First: Jesus has appealed to an authority which his audience already respects. Remember he is speaking in the synagogue, so presumably his audience already knows and respects the prophets to whom Jesus implicitly refers. Jesus has implied a reference to a day of justice and vindication for the righteous and the poor. Secondly, Jesus has followed up his teaching with action: he has done something healing, which we know from Mark's context, has a lot to do with forgiveness. What does this mean for us, who are trying to be fishers of people as Jesus has in fact called us to be?

First, we don't manufacture new teaching, but preach what has been known about God from the beginning: that God is loving and good forgiving and desires relationship with human beings and stands for both justice and mercy. Secondly, we preach it with some immediacy: this is not a matter for the distant and nebulous future, but one for the here and now. We participate in the kingdom of God *now*. Righteousness, mercy and justice are not things we can put off taking responsibility for, but must actively work for now. Thirdly, if our preaching is to be considered authoritative, what we preach about a God of love and forgiveness and healing must be reflected in our own actions of love and forgiveness and healing.

Not a new teaching, strictly speaking. But when people follow up preaching about love and forgiveness and justice and healing with an actual demonstration of love and forgiveness and justice and healing, it makes quite an impression.