

Good Teaching

Mark 1:22-28

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In keeping with Mark's fast-paced agenda, we're only two dozen verses into the first chapter, yet already Jesus has been baptized, spent one verse being tempted by the devil in the desert, another handful of verses picking up the disciples, and now in the 22nd verse he launches into his ministry with a sermon and an exorcism. Time's a-wasting!

Also in keeping with Mark's fast pace, he doesn't actually tell us what Jesus preached that day. In John, Jesus never stops preaching. In Matthew we get a three-chapter-long sermon on the mount. In Luke we at least get Jesus quoting from Isaiah, but Mark we have no recording at all. "He entered the synagogue and taught, and they were astounded at his teaching." That's it. What impressed them? We don't know! Mark will later get into some teachings of course, but here at the beginning we don't hear it. It's almost as if with Mark what is important is not what Jesus taught, but the effect his teaching had on those who heard him. And indeed this is the case, for later in the gospel when Jesus shows up in Jerusalem, the religious leaders plot to kill him, and I quote, "because the crowd was spellbound by his teaching." The emphasis again is not on the substance of what he taught, but on the effect he had on the people who heard him.

Originally I planned to preach on the exorcism story, but as I looked at the text more, it was this issue of teaching that really stuck in my mind. All the more so because the crowd's reaction to the exorcism is, "What's this? A new teaching with authority!" Clearly the teaching thing is a huge issue. It's the fact that he teaches with authority, or with power. But what does that mean?

It got me thinking about the teachers I've had over the years, which ones were memorably bad, but more importantly, which ones were memorably good. And what I found is that while the bad ones make for amusing anecdotes, the thing about the good ones is that in some way they didn't just teach a subject, they impacted my life. What makes a good teacher is not really how well they know their subject, but rather their passion. Good teachers love the subject they teach, but they also love learning in general, and most importantly, they love their students.

Consider my tenth grade history teacher, one of the greats. She did not always know her subject well. For example, she told us that the expense for building the Statue of Liberty was one of the causes of the French Revolution. Even back then I knew that the Statue of Liberty was built a hundred years *after* the French Revolution. But the way she told history, it was like a giant, ongoing soap opera of flamboyant personalities, crazy deeds, heroism and horror, sex and violence. In short, everything you look for in a really entertaining movie. Because of her, I have never seen history as a list of boring dates, but as an exciting adventure. So she was wrong about a few things. Thanks to her, I was interested enough to read on my own and in correcting her mistakes, I've learned so much more than she ever could have taught in just one year.

Compare her to my eleventh grade chemistry teacher. Clearly brilliant, knew her subject very well. But she was terminally boring. Hers is the only class in my pre-college career in which I regularly fell asleep. Thanks to her, to this day my eyes glaze over at the mere sight of the periodic table of the elements.

We all have experiences of good and bad teachers. I bet you've already got a few examples of each in mind. They do tend to make an impression! But I'll also bet that the good teachers were the ones that aroused our curiosity and empowered us

to learn. They made the subject exciting and interesting, and they taught us how to learn, which is the really important thing. Good teachers have faith in their students' ability to learn. Bad teachers, though. Ironically, it's the bad teachers who are the most authoritarian, the ones who act like they are the ones who hold all the knowledge, and the students' sole job is to copy it all down and memorize it. Bad teachers think students are stupid, and they therefore don't invite questions, comments, or exploration.

If we think about it this way, then we start to see why it is that Jesus' teaching might have hit people the way it did, and why the Powers That Be were so afraid of him. Even though Jesus did have all the answers, he clearly didn't act that way toward his listeners. He taught them in a way that intrigued them and aroused their curiosity. Just think of those parables! They aren't multiple-choice tests. They are designed to force the listeners to ponder and think about it.

How then must the religious leaders of the day have taught? Surely they taught as if they were the only ones who knew anything, as if God's truth was something the ordinary person could not possibly understand, as if people would only ever learn anything if they consulted the religious leaders first. Those leaders set themselves up as the authorities, yet clearly the people didn't buy it. When Jesus showed up, they were impressed not by his credentials, but by the power with which he taught, a power that unleashed the power of their own minds.

This then is why the story of the demon possession takes place at this point in the gospel. The man's mind is held captive by the demon, a false authority. Indeed, bible scholars say that the demon here is symbolic of the religious leaders. The man's mind was held captive, enslaved, by the old authoritarian way. He didn't think for himself, but only as he had been instructed to think. But Jesus shows up teaching, and liberates his mind. He casts off those old chains and awakens the man's own intellect, his power, his ability. When the demons in the man are speaking, it is in the plural, "What have you to do with us? Will you destroy us?" But suddenly the pronoun changes to the singular, and it is the man speaking by himself. "I know you. You are the Holy One of God." The enslaved way of thinking sees Jesus as the enemy. The liberated way of thinking sees him as the Holy One. That is why the crowds say, "Look at this! A new teaching with authority!" An authority that leads to direct results, the liberation of our minds, the changing of our lives.

Think about why it is that great teachers are so often seen as dangerous. Socrates was put to death for the crime of corrupting the youth. Why? Because he taught them to question authority and think for themselves. Women throughout history, and blacks during the time of slavery, were forbidden to learn to read. Why? Because literacy is the first step toward thinking for yourself, the most important tool for learning. Even today, our curriculum wars over how kids should be taught about sex or drugs, race or gender, science and evolution – all of that is a battle between authority and knowledge. Is the purpose of education to teach kids what we permit them to know? Or is the purpose to teach them to learn? Good teachers are dangerous because they unleash students' potential, unleash their own power, and students who think for themselves are students who cannot be controlled. No wonder the authorities are scared! "What have you to do with us?" they protest along with the demons. "Have you come to destroy us?" It's a good question.

The thing is, Jesus did not destroy them. He cast them out. I would say he revealed them, he exposed them. What does that mean? Well, the only way authoritarian teaching works is if people don't know there could be other answers. They think the authorities are the only ones who have the answer key. My sister, the college English professor, sees this all the time in her students, young people who think the point of education is to have the right answer, and you get that answer however you can: by cheat sheets, by stealing the answer key, by plagiarizing a paper online – or sometimes just by sheer sweat and labor. My sister's main task is to unteach them. The point is not to have the right answer, but to find the answer,

to search for yourself, to work it out for yourself. To learn that there are many different answers, and you need to know how to tell the right ones from the wrong ones, the good from the bad.

That's what Jesus did with the demons. In casting them out of the man's mind, its like the scales falling off the eyes so that the man can see for himself, can learn on his own and arrive at his own conclusion, rather than just parrot back what the experts tell him. This is what Jesus meant when he later said, "Call no one master or teacher, for you have one master and teacher who is in heaven." Jesus unmasked the demon, and the people saw for themselves that the demons' authority was a fraud. It's not so much that they were spellbound by Jesus, but that the spell of the authorities was at last broken.

Of course, Christians are only human, and no sooner were we liberated than we started chaining minds up again once more, with the irony that churches and religious leaders, including ministers, can be the worst offenders. We are always tempted to see Jesus as a dangerous commodity, someone who should only be handled by the experts, something which the hoi polloi cannot understand on their own. And it's not just religious leaders who do this. The hoi polloi do it too, when they say, "The Bible is too hard to read, theology is impossible to understand, and only the ministers, the scholars, the Pope, can understand it."

No! No, these people are of use only insofar as they serve as resources for you, not as the authority with the answer key. Jesus came to liberate our minds. He invites us to engage with the truth on our own, on our own terms, in our own way. Only then can it truly become our own. Only then can we truly harness our own power in the service of God's mission. So let us not hold back on ourselves or on others. Jesus is ready. Let's open up our textbooks and begin!