

“NOT AS THE SCRIBES”

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 28, 2018

Text: Mark 1:21-28

We are in chapter 1 of Mark. Right after Jesus was baptized. Before he became widely known. Jesus had been baptized, and he had a couple followers. That's it. Up till now.

We are in the Epiphany season. It is only beginning to dawn on people that something out of the ordinary is taking place in Galilee.

Mark had probably told his stories about Jesus in many circumstances over several years, but now he was writing them down in an orderly fashion, so that after he died people would read and understand. People like you and me.

So he starts off with a story which (for Mark) is a paradigm for who Jesus is and what Jesus does. Why Jesus is worshiped as God by people who believe in him. He begins with Jesus in a synagogue on the sabbath in front of spectators, casting an evil spirit out of a man. Mark records the impact on everyone present. They were first of all amazed already just by the way he taught: “as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Then, when he cast out the evil spirit and it departed, they were amazed and “kept on . . . kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him!”

I don't want to be unfair to scribes, because scribes are necessary. At tax time, get a tax advisor. When you have a question about your health, go to a doctor. When you have a religious question, ask a scribe. One who knows what the law says and can do a good job of nuancing it when you face a tough question.

Like, for example, whether it is okay to eat food which has been sacrificed to idols. Ask Paul. He will

give you several verses on the topic, and you will know what to do (see today's Second Reading). Or, if it has to do with divorce: ask Moses, and he will tell you specifically which exceptions apply to the general law. If you want someone to divide up an inheritance in a fair way, take it to a judge. Or you can always ask Jesus, if he is in the vicinity.

But let's see, somebody tried that once. And Jesus said, “Who made me a judge over you?” People asked him once, if a woman was married to several husbands who died, to which of them she would be married in the resurrection. He shrugged off the question, telling them they didn't know what they were talking about. Not a good scribe, Jesus.

He did not talk like the scribes. He was different. He spoke with authority.

It is not as though the scribes did not speak confidently. But their confidence relied on a lot of explaining and justifying and footnotes citing earlier rabbis. It was always complicated.

Jesus did not talk like that, and from day one people noticed the difference.

I'll explain the difference as I see it, because I think the difference is good news for us.

First, let me reiterate that I do not want you to think there is something wrong with scribes. They are only human, after all. And most of the time, when we go to make difficult decisions, we need the help and the perspective of others to see the best way to do things.

But scribes could be wrong. And people knew it. They played scribes off against one another. Once they tried to tempt Jesus into answering a scribe-

type question about paying taxes to Caesar, and he blew them out of the water with his dynamite answer which a) did not help them with their question, because they still didn't know whether they should pay the tax; and b) accused them deeply of failing to give full loyalty to God.

So it's interesting to note that Jesus time after time dodged practical questions or gave hugely impractical answers—like when he praised the woman who gave two cents to the temple treasury, which certainly did not help the temple very much to do its vital work.

Jesus did not speak like the scribes, because he was not answering small questions. He was answering the large question. You could put it other ways, but I like the way it is phrased in 2 Corinthians 8:6. BEFORE Paul gives his "scribe's answer" on the question of whether a certain piece of beef should be thrown away or cooked, he answers the fundamental questions of where we all come from and for whom we exist and how we come to be on such wonderful terms with God.

On the question of for whom we exist, Jesus could be adamant. He didn't need to hedge that. He could say, on the one hand "You ought to be living for God, but you are not." He said this loud and clear several times, and it made people very uncomfortable. But, and this was his specialty, he spoke loudly and clearly to people who were beyond the pale, separated from God, and with his words he brought them into the kingdom. By his words and actions, full of authority, he defied the status quo and gave life to people. No footnotes to that!

In this story there was a man possessed of an unclean spirit in the synagogue. Where he did not belong. Bothering people. Apparently God had given him over to Satan! He was not a part of the "synagogue," the "congregation" of holy people. The other people looked at him with disgust and fear.

But Jesus looked at that man and with a few words, which didn't need to be loud but were certainly attention-getting, spoke the man back into the arms of God! It was as though God said "Let there be light!" and there was light. He had been possessed by an unclean spirit; now he was possessed by God.

He spoke with authority, not as the scribes.

When Jesus spoke with authority, it was not to help people "figure out what they should do." It was to empower them to be what God called them to be. Jesus spoke with surgical authority to give people back the hearts God had created in the first place, hearts devoted to God. Thankful to God. Hearts filled with love, and capable of self-giving love.

And after he had gone on like that a couple years, "speaking with authority and not as the scribes," and making lame people walk and the blind see;

. . . after the scribes and the Pharisees had tested and re-tested his ability to come up with clever answers and he kept backing them off with sentences like "unless you all repent, you will likewise perish" . . .

. . . After they had had their fill of Jesus interrupting them and condemning their judging of others and mocking them for tithing spices . . .

When those people realized they could not compete with Jesus, they had him executed. They were that sure he was wrong!

Not primarily for shaming them with his impossibly absolute judgments (whoever looks at a woman, whoever calls his brother a name, etc.); but for declaring unconditionally that the peace of God was available even to people who clearly did not deserve it. Jesus was absolute about forgiveness. And he would do that even in the synagogue. Even on a sabbath. As though he spoke for God.

I am glad that the peace of God which fills our hearts does not need a lot of discussion. I'm glad we don't need to get second and third opinions. We have the

absolute word of one who made himself totally clear that all God wants is for us to receive him, and he is ours. And we are his.

Amen.

