

January 3,1 2021

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Year B, Epiphany 4, Mark 1:21-28      "Taking Authority"

Our scripture reading today is the beginning of Jesus' ministry in Mark's gospel. In this text, Mark establishes the authority of Jesus. After calling his first disciples, Jesus began to teach at the synagogue in Capernaum and the people noticed something different about him. He didn't teach in the usual way. He didn't teach like the scribes taught. There was something about him that made people take notice. They were astounded and amazed, because he taught as one having authority.

All I want to do with today's sermon is explore this idea of what it means to have authority. Why was it important for Jesus to demonstrate authority? What does it mean for us to have authority in our own lives? I think there might be a helpful message in this scripture passage at this time when much of life might seem out of our control.

When I was quite young, I received, a pad of paper. It was a fancy "to do" list, actually. Each page had bold letters at the top, in a fun font, that read: "Dumb Things I Gotta Do." All down the page, there were lines for making a "to do" list. I don't remember where I got it. It might have been a Christmas present. It might have come from my parents. Apparently, even at a young age, it was clear I needed help organizing my life and getting things done.

I still make lists. I have an ongoing list of things to do. Some days, I'll take a post-it note and make an urgent list to attach to my ongoing list. It surprises me, I still think about that pad of paper from so long ago. As I write things like: go to the cleaners, buy milk, file taxes, renew car registration, I marvel that after all these years, I'm still listing out the "dumb things I gotta do."

Sometimes our "to do" list can be overwhelming. It's not just the "dumb things we gotta do." Most of us have really important things we have to do. We have significant responsibilities. The cat has to be fed every day. The kids have to be fed every day and clothed and woken up for school. Those with aging parents are often required to handle difficult tasks they never anticipated having to do. A lot of life is about getting up in the morning and going to work.

I sometimes talk with people who feel powerless over their own lives. They're so busy managing the expectations of others and tending to obligations, it feels like their life is not their own. Any of us can get to a place where there's so much we HAVE to do that it seems like there's never any time for the things we WANT to do.

Have you ever felt guilty about trying to carve out a little time for yourself? Do you tend to put your own dreams and desires on the back burner? I looked up the definition of the word authority. The definition varies from one dictionary to another, but the one thing they all agree on is that authority involves power. Authority is defined as the power to give orders or make decisions.

I want to say that even with so much in life that is out of our control, even with all our responsibilities and obligations, we are not powerless. We can exercise some measure of authority over our own lives. Author Frank Thomas talks about how most of the rights we have, such as free speech and the right to assemble, can be taken away. But the one right no one can ever take away is the power to choose how we respond in any situation. In other words, God created us with power and therefore, with some measure of authority.

Maybe when Jesus demonstrated his authority, it wasn't simply for the purpose of demanding our obedience. Maybe it was an example. By teaching with authority and confronting unclean spirits, maybe he was demonstrating how he wanted his followers to use their God given power.

This past year has been awful in so many ways. There is so much that is outside our control. Travel plans have been put on hold. Many of us have not been able to visit our loved ones in person. We're confined at home. Many of us are exhausted. I got a laugh earlier in the pandemic when first heard someone announce, "Well, I finished Netflix."

I think now, more than ever, it's important to claim our authority. None of us has 100% control over our "to do" lists or our appointment books, but we are not merely victims of our circumstances. We do have choices. I believe discipleship of Jesus Christ requires us to be the authorities of our own lives to the extent that's possible.

I saw a great commercial the other day. It was an advertisement for a car. I don't know which one. A family was packed in the car to go camping. The mom was driving. The dad was in the passenger seat and they were all having a great time. The kids are singing and laughing. They were all being loud and boisterous.

When they got to the campsite, the kids piled out of the car. The dad opened the door and began to exit the vehicle. When he noticed mom sitting still in her seat, he asked, "Are you coming?" She said, "I'll be there in a minute." He immediately understood. He got it! Mom was going to have just a minute to herself in the peace and quiet. That's what I mean by taking authority for one's life. It was a small thing, but she claimed a moment of peace and quiet for herself.

The authority Jesus demonstrated in today's reading was authority over the powers that be, the scribes, demons. There's no doubt, that's the best use of one's authority, but you have to start somewhere. Just recognizing one's authority can be a big step.

Recently, I saw a meme that gave me a good laugh. It read, "Life's short. Make sure you spend as much time as possible on the Internet arguing with strangers about politics." If you enjoy that sort of thing, go for it. But if you find yourself arguing with complete strangers, that might be a good opportunity to take authority over your life. Maybe close the laptop and take a nap. Go for a walk outside. Play with the dog.

I was originally ordained in the United Methodist Church. In the UMC they do things very differently than we do here in the Congregational Church. There are bishops. In my ordination ceremony, the Bishop placed her hands on my head and said, "Take the authority to preach the Gospel. Take the authority to order the life of the church."

There's something beautiful about having that kind of clarity. Everyone in attendance heard the words come from the bishop's mouth. They saw the bishop physically lay her hands on my head, conveying the passing of authority. Honestly, there are a lot of days I don't feel all that authoritative. It can feel like I don't have all that much control over what happens around me. I need reminders that I have choices. I need reminders that I have some control over my schedule. I need reminders that I have decision making power.

If I could, I would place my hands on your head and say those same words. Take you the authority. Take the authority to go to bed at a decent time. Take the authority to walk outdoors every day. Take the authority to put on some good music. Take the authority to waste a little time if that's what you need.

I hope for the day when people look at you with wonder and amazement. I hope for the day when people look at you and say, "There's something different about you. You're not like most people I know. You live your life as one with authority."