

Text: Mark 1:21-28
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Grace and Peace be unto you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

If you have ever spent anytime on a schoolyard playground during recess, you have no doubt heard the repeated phrase, "sticks and stones can break my bones, but names will hurt me." This is a good and healthy saying that parents teach their young children to help them deal with conflicts and hurtful things said by others about them.

Of course, as adults, who have spent a few more years walking upon this earth, we know the truth- we know that words can hurt; often more than sticks and stones.

There is no doubt about it, if used in a harmful way, words can hurt, sadden, and tear down lives and relationships.

But, as hopefully we have all experienced, words can often build up and strengthen relationships. Words of appreciation, gentle words of love, and courageous words of hope can all work wondrous things.

Of course, some words have more power than others. Pastor Valbracht tells the following story: It was in the early years of my ministry that one Sunday preaching my sermon I had just gotten well into the sermon, when a baby started to cry down in one of the front pews. The mother, very much embarrassed, snatched up the baby and started out down the main aisle. I then stopped right in my sermon, and said, "Madam, you don't have to take that baby out. He isn't bothering me." She answered, "No?" "Well you are certainly bothering him. (Story courtesy of Pastor Tim Zingale)

What gives words their power- their ability to tear down or build up- are whom they are spoken by. A child telling their parent they love them means more than someone on T.V. saying "love ya". "Thank you for help", means more coming from a neighbour than from a telemarketer.

Words are all around us. Words are everywhere in our world. Most of them we ignore, some of them we hear, and a precious few of them we actually listen and respond to.

Today in our Scripture reading we find Jesus speaking and using powerful words. In our reading this morning, we find Jesus (after selecting some of his first apostles) entering the synagogue at Capernaum. Here, in the Scripture, we are told that on the Sabbath Jesus began teaching the people.

And it is here, at this point in our reading that Mark tells us that people were "astonished" because Jesus taught "as one who had authority." (Mark 1:22)

Now what does Mark mean when he says that Jesus taught "as one who had authority"? What is it that Mark is telling us about Christ?

Well, authority is connected to power. That is why we often call the police "the authority". We use this term because they have been granted the authority by the government to investigate and arrest us if need be. They have been granted power through the position which they hold.

When Mark speaks of Christ's authority, he isn't suggesting the Jesus is a divine crime fighter. Rather Mark is stating that it was obvious to the people that Christ had been granted some measure of extraordinary power. While people might not have immediately recognized that Jesus was the messiah (Mark 1:27), they definitely recognized through his teaching and preaching that there was a power dwelling within him.

Of course, someone or something in that synagogue did recognize Christ as the Son of God. We are told that as Christ taught in the synagogue, a man with an unclean (read it as evil) spirit came forward and stated, "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." (Mark 1:24)

Now, in the face of this unclean spirit, Christ speaks a word of authority commanding it to be silent and to leave the man. And as these words were spoken, the man was freed from the unclean spirit.

This is the power of God...This is the authority of Christ.

Today, as we gather together, Christ still speaks to us with authority and power as he announces to us “your sins are forgiven”, “this is my body and blood given for you”, and “wherever two or more are gathered under my name I will be there”. Christ still enters into our lives with power and glory.

Considering the recent federal election that we have all just gone through, our discussion on authority appears timely and appropriate.

Many people are suspicious of those who seek to hold or occupy positions of authority in the world the over us. We fear, as Christ says that they will “lord it over us” and use our disadvantage to their own benefit. And we worry for good reason as history is filled and with riddled with people who exercised their authority over others inappropriately and destructively. As the old saying goes, “Absolute power...corrupts absolutely”.

Today, as we gather together we witness the Son of God- someone who has absolute authority over our lives and word- exercises his authority.

So how did Jesus exercise his authority? How did he use his power?

Interestingly, Jesus does not use his authority and power in a way that we might imagine. He doesn't bring armies to their knees, he doesn't make kings bow down before him, he doesn't use others for his own gain, and he doesn't even surround himself with a lavish lifestyle.

No...Christ uses his authority and power in the most humblest of ways. Rather than lording it over people, rather than “showing off” to the world; Christ uses his authority and power in service to others. He uses his gifts for the benefits of all.

That is why today in our Scripture reading we don't find Christ seated on a golden throne, we don't find young maidens dropping grapes into his mouth...No this isn't the Christ that we find. The Christ that we find in today's reading is someone who uses his power and authority to serve others. That is where we find Christ today, as he begins his public ministry, preaching, teaching, and healing in the synagogue. I think that there is a lesson for the entire world to learn here...

Martin Luther and many of the other early reformers saw this in Christ's ministry and incorporated it in their own theology. It is because of Christ's own example of ministry, teaching, and service that we as a church support Sunday school, encourage Confirmation attendance, engage in Bible studies, and support the work of charitable organization like the food bank, The LWF, and GHDA.

We recognize the importance of growing in the Spirit, of studying God's Word, and using our gifts and blessings to help others. When we work as a church to do these things, we are trying to model Christ's own ministry in our present world. We do all of these things to serve God and others- not ourselves.

This is the model of service ministry and life that Christ has set for us. As Christ gives the great commission to us (Matthew 28:16-19) to preach, teach, and baptize all nations- he is calling us to follow in his footsteps. He is calling us to respond to the world with love, care and compassion.

Christ is not calling us to sit on golden thrones, to look down our noses at others, or withdraw from the world worried that its sinfulness may “rub” off on us.

No...Christ is calling us to roll up our sleeves, to give thanks for our blessings, and to go out into the world to share them with others through service, friendship, compassion, and teaching. This is at the heart of the gospel, and it's here that we find our Lord and Savior.

Amen