

# *“A New Teaching – With Authority”*

*Dt. 18:15-20; I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, January 28, 2018, Epiphany 4, dedicated to my wife Susan Sitler who has journeyed with me through 33 years of ministry, to Kent Shimeall for his outstanding service as our 2017 Moderator, to our 2017 Church Council, to my colleagues on the staff at First Church, to all the educators in our congregation and always to the glory of God!

*“A New Teaching – With Authority!”*

*Dt. 18:15-20; I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28*

We are in the Epiphany season. This Epiphany season is time when the church universal reflects on the authority of God, God’s commands, God’s purpose and God’s promise. The notion of God authorizing activity may strike us as odd in our privatized world where autonomous human agents seem to act as the elemental units of reality.

Epiphany is a time when we think precisely and with daring against autonomous actions as the answer to everything. Rather, we trust God to be the One who galvanizes us and pulls us together into community- a community that lives and acts on behalf of the common good - A Community where prophets and teachers matter – a community where authority

rests with those who teach and heal and make a difference in the world. We dare to overcome autonomous actors.

Let us explore what it means to teach with authority....

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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**Teachers make a difference in our lives.** Their style and character; their knowledge and wisdom; their presence and tone stick with us and shape our understanding of history, math, science and life. Some teachers move us deeply. The passion and love they feel and convey for their beloved students and subjects or their methodology of teaching turn us on and tune-us-in in ways we never imagined possible.

Mrs. Chubb, Mrs. Hoot, Mrs. Kaufmann, Miss Lipton and Mr. Heffernan are teachers from my earliest years who left a lasting imprint on me - even though they all taught me before the 1960's had come to an end. They taught me to read and write; to love poetry, history and science and even to "appreciate" mathematics. Most of all, they taught me to love

school and learning. Because of them, I wanted to come to school each day.

A few years ago, when I was back home, I saw “Miss Lipton” in the store. I felt like I was seven years old again. Although I was only 17 years younger and now stood almost 1½ feet taller, I felt like that kid again - shoulders back – standing quietly in line to go to the playground. Miss Lipton was about 4’7” (with her shoulders back) but she taught and ran her class with great authority. When she spoke (softly) I listened. 50 years had passed, but while standing in the grocery store aisle, I still felt like I should raise my hand to speak in her presence. That is authority.

Throughout elementary school, junior high, high school, on to Macalester College and Yale Divinity School, even during my doctoral studies at Chicago Theological Seminary, one teacher after another grabbed my attention and imagination, taught and inspired me. Although I never matriculated in her classroom and acted in her theatre, my mom, “Mrs. Ahrens,” still stands out as the greatest teacher from whom I was fortunate enough to learn.

Each of the teachers who shaped and changed my life, brought a “new teaching” and do so with new authority in my life and the lives of others in their classrooms.

Teaching with authority has been the measure of my life in education. How about you? Who are the men and women who inspired you as teachers and educators? Who are the people who taught with authority in your life? **Write down their names.** If you still have a chance, let them know how they touched your life!

Teaching with authority has its roots deep in human history. And the weight of this authority rests squarely on the shoulders of those who teach. In the Letter of James (3:1), the brother of Jesus writes, “*Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, because you know that we will be judged more strictly.*” I believe, anyone who teaches must carry this passage as a mantra. If you are shaping the faith and life of children and adults, you must do so with clarity and discipline. James calls us as teachers to take seriously the impact and weight of all we say and do.

Moses understood the importance of teaching and prophesying with authority. In Deuteronomy 18:15-20, we are introduced to twin in the theme of authority. **The twin of authority is idolatry.** While the prophet speaks with authority, we are reminded that some prophets become witnesses to idols. They become seduced by the world’s desire to make their prophecies fit the leader of the day or the ruling party of the times. Anyone who seeks to tone down God’s

word or compromise God or Scuttle the Covenant of God's promise is in deep trouble. The seduction of yielding to false messages, to follow gods who are less demanding leads to the death of false prophets.

Let's face it, the nature of the church is that we must host the prophetic-Mosaic word in all its frightening honesty. That word is often a hard one, and so both prophet and people may wish for a much more palatable word. There is a temptation in all of us to tone down something which makes us uncomfortable, or challenges the group around us, but to silence the speaker or distort the word risks the covenantal ethic of which we are apart. One who teaches and speaks prophetic truth **with authority** does not to candy-coat the truth.

We see this "non-candy-coating" word come alive in Mark 1:21-28. Jesus is faithfully attending synagogue on the Sabbath and he is teaching those gathered--religious experts and the people gathered around them--in a way that is so impressive that it conveys authority. You might say his teaching "carries weight." Mark, unlike Luke (recounting a similar scene in Nazareth), or Matthew (with the Sermon on the Mount), doesn't tell us *what* Jesus says, but seems to care more about telling us just *how* powerfully he teaches.

Jesus teaches with “authority” according to Mark. The word “authority,” of course, has more than one meaning. Even a corrupt judge or corrupt police officer has “authority” But the simplest, poorest person in the world can speak with a different kind of “authority” if they embody wisdom and integrity that others find compelling. Each one holds a different kind of power, one from the *outside*, and the other from *within*.

The Scribes (those teaching around Jesus) sound authoritative because they can cite chapter and verse of the Scriptures. Even today, scholars and preachers back up what they say in much the same way, citing Scripture and the scholarship that surrounds it.

When Jesus, this carpenter from dusty little Nazareth, walks into the synagogue and speaks in a way that “astounded” the people, more than one person must sense trouble brewing. “Who is this man?”, they must wonder, where did he go to school, what are his credentials, and who gave him the right to speak this way? Scholars seem to disagree on whether the reaction is positive or mixed; perhaps some love what they hear, and others are disturbed by it. In any case, this is no ordinary “Saturday at the Synagogue.”

And “just then” (Mark loves that expression; it certainly builds suspense), things get even more extraordinary, when Jesus’ teaching in words becomes teaching in action. A man tortured by, in bondage to, an “unclean spirit” emerges from the crowd, right in the midst of the commotion over Jesus’ power-filled teaching. Ironically, while others are full of questions about Jesus, this evil spirit is the only one who recognizes who Jesus is, his true identity. It is as if radical evil has a way of immediately discerning the presence of good. Jesus commands the spirit to be quiet (perhaps to protect his identity so early in his ministry?) and then expels it from the man, freeing him from a terrible bondage.

We never hear any more about this man, but the whole region hears about what has happened to him because of this amazing teacher. Jesus has backed up his words, and his powerful preaching, with an action that illustrates what he is “about.” This is a NEW teaching – with authority.

His authority is something other than credibility or reliability. He speaks directly to the “unclean spirit” and the unclean spirit leaves the man. Here is a very different kind of teacher. This is not about quoting scripture or reading from a text book in a way that makes it come alive. Jesus pulls from a power source beyond knowledge and wisdom. Jesus calls from

a power source which is fueled by the Holy Spirit and God's amazing love and grace. Jesus speaks truth with love.

It is easy for us to get tangled up in the drama of the exorcism of an unclean spirit. Everyone loves a great exorcism! But, the real issue here is the power with which Jesus speaks and acts. He is able to differentiate the spirit of good and evil and see what needs to be changed and what needs to be preserved. The Spirit goes, and the man continues to live – free of the burdens of the spirit.

We are hungering today for the spirit and the power of Jesus. From classroom to classroom, from school to school, from church to church, we need the presence of those who speak truth with love to power – whether that power is an unclean spirit moving in our midst or a leader who spews hate and disdain for others, we need to address the unclean spirits of our times. Truth spoken in love will advance God's healing presence in this world. Teaching with Authority will transform lives. Let us be the ones who teach with authority – always and everywhere in the spirit of love. Amen.

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