

Epiphany 4, Year B, 02-01-09
The Rev. Mary Robert

When I think of teachers, I think of Mrs. Madinger, my Kindergarten teacher who helped me learn to read and made it something I would cherish doing all my life. I think of Judy Running, our choir director at Otey Parish church in Sewanee when I was a kid, who put music and church together in a bond that cannot be broken for me. I think of Don Armentrout, my church history professor in seminary, who made history fun and interesting and important.

These and other teachers I've had were not in powerful positions, at least not by the world's standards. But these teachers amaze me with the impact they've had on my life and the lives of so many other students. They were poorly paid, they spent long hours in school, they had to deal with some kids that didn't want to learn, they won't ever be famous -- yet they had incredible power, because they taught with authority. They knew what they were doing. They taught truthfully and honestly.

I had some lousy teachers, too. You probably did as well. I remember Mrs. Fanning in high school and my college sociology teacher who wore leather pants and...I'd better stop there. They, too, had power but they used it the wrong way. They were dishonest and deceitful. Their teaching did not come with authority.

Teachers are very powerful. They can change lives. But they have the power to change those lives for the good or for the bad.

Today's Gospel lesson calls us to enter this world of powerful teachers. We are already in the early ministry of Jesus. Remember, as Jim told us last week, Mark has no birth narrative, no stories of Jesus' childhood. He begins, instead, with the story of John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus with his preaching, then with the baptism of Jesus, and then straight on into Jesus calling the disciples to follow him, beginning his ministry. And that's where we are today — the beginning of Jesus' ministry. How does it begin? With teaching. But not just any kind of teaching; it is teaching that, unlike the scribes, is teaching with "authority."

It's interesting to me that Mark doesn't mention what it is that Jesus is teaching about. In his gospel, Mark lets us know what makes Jesus' teaching authoritative is not its content, but his person; his teaching is authoritative because of who he is — "the Holy One of God."

Jesus is like those good teachers in our past: we don't remember the details of what they taught as much as we remember the power of their person.

The people who hear Jesus in the synagogue automatically contrast his teaching with what they know, with what they have experienced, with the teaching of the scribes. And, unlike the scribes, the people perceive that Jesus teaches with "authority." That is, Jesus brings something extra to the table, he has something the scribes don't. What is that something extra? Well, look at what happens next — Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit.

In the gospel of Mark, there's no differentiation between Jesus' teaching and his healing. It's all part of the same package. So, when the people hear Jesus teach with authority and see Jesus heal with authority, they're "astounded / amazed" because this is something new. This man is not at all like what they've experienced with the scribes. This teacher is different.

Nowadays, we often use the words "power" and "authority" interchangeably. But it is possible to make a distinction between the two. Power is often described in terms such as command, influence, rule, supremacy, and dominance; someone who tells others what to do and how to do it. In Jesus' world, the scribes, as well as the Pharisees and the Sadducees, had "power" because their job was to be interpreters of the law. They decided what and who was acceptable, and what and who was not acceptable.

Authority, which can mean the same things as power, can, on the other hand, mean a quality that is respected, obvious knowledge and experience, and legitimate power. Like the teachers I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, authority is a quality marked by experience and authenticity and love.

"Authority," in the best sense of the word, is persuasive; it doesn't need nor does it depend on threats of force. People gravitate toward genuine authority because it is persuasive, because it speaks to the heart, because genuine authority is recognized as being different, as having come from above.

As for the scribes et al, they are folks who may have a general understanding of the law but who possess no feeling for the spirit of the law. In other words, they have power but no authority. Genuine "authority" comes not from having degrees, or uniforms or titles, but from the call God makes to us at our baptism. Jesus had

authority because God gave it to him at his baptism, calling Jesus his "beloved Son."

And this authority was born of love, to be sure.

So, Jesus is different from the scribes, because Jesus teaches with "authority." Jesus' authority comes from above, directly from God. And it's this divine authority that we see unfold in the gospel of Mark. It's this divine authority that is constantly being critiqued by those in power because they feel threatened by it; it is this divine authority that is constantly being challenged because they fear losing their power. And they're right to feel threatened and afraid, because it is Jesus' divine authority that ultimately trumps all worldly powers.

Now, we are the ones who stand in the synagogue, watching the meaning of Jesus' authority unfold in our own lives and in the lives of the people we are called to serve. We know that the strength of Jesus' authority lies in his experience and authenticity and love.

The sort of experience that came from living the same life you and I do.

The kind of authenticity that has one recognizing that there is no deception, but only truth experienced in every encounter.

The sort of love that did so much more than simply teach and heal, more than feed thousands and cast aside evil. The kind of love that gives it all away --- even life itself --- for the sake of this world God so loves...

There's a story I have told before - it's an old Native American story about a chief instructing some of his braves about the struggle within. "It is like two dogs fighting inside of us," the chief told them. "There is a good dog who wants to do the right and a bad dog who wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is winning the fight."

"Who is going to win in the end?" a young brave asks.

"The one that you feed," the chief answered.

The only food available to feed the good dog within us comes from *God*. It's the food of hope and grace, food whose singular nutritional authority comes from *God*. So we come together here as the body of *Christ*, to thank *God* for the food that brings us life, and to receive that food for the journey again. It's here that we receive strength and renewal through the food of hope and grace. It's here that we meet the "Holy One of *God*" who has the authority to teach us, to heal us, to call evil out of us, to forgive us, and to transform us into that body.

It's here that we are fed on *God's* word. It's here that we are nourished by the sacraments that make us one and transform us at the same time. And it is here that, as we follow the light out into the world, we are given the authority to speak, to live, to heal, and to feed. Now, that's something to be amazed about! Amen.