

“Have You Ever Interrupted a Sermon?”

Mark 1:21-28

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Have you ever interrupted a sermon or been in a service when one was? That’s a loaded question, isn’t it? I’ve sat through a few that I wanted to interrupt and have even preached some that I wished had been. I commend you for your patience.

Occasionally, I speak to the students in the preaching class at McAfee. I have jokingly told them that if they cannot find a safe place to land a sermon, just crash it. The passengers in the pews will find their way out of the wreckage and make their way safely home.

I don’t think Jesus was struggling with his sermon the day that he was interrupted. To the contrary, what he was teaching, and Mark doesn’t tell us what it was, must have been quite good. The people were “astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, not as the scribes.”

I don’t think the people were looking at their watches, texting their friends or thinking about where they were going to eat lunch. I believe they were wrapped up in what Jesus was telling them and he had their undivided attention.

However, all of that changed when a nameless man appeared in the synagogue and found his way in front of Jesus. He was desperately ill. Mark said he had an unclean spirit. This was his way of saying that at times he was not himself and his behavior was not appropriate.

Whatever had control of him began talking to Jesus. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

Jesus rebuked the spirit and said, “Be silent and come out of him!” Reluctantly and with great anguish, the unclean spirit did and the man was healed.

This impressed people, too. Just as they were astonished at Jesus’ ability to teach, they were no doubt equally impressed with his ability to heal.

I, too, am impressed with Jesus when I read this story, and let me tell you how. I am impressed with his wisdom, courage and power.

What was different about Jesus’ teaching from that of the scribes? After all, they used the same texts. The difference was in the interpretation of those ancient texts.

On a variety of subjects, from murder to adultery to revenge to stewardship, Matthew often quoted Jesus saying, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, but I say to you...” Jesus simply looked the people in the eye and spoke from his heart and his words connected with their hearts. His teaching fed their spirits and helped them to better understand God, life and the world around them. What he said made sense to them, not because it was easy, but because it was right and delivered with the conviction of a prophet. He did not merely quote the “authorities,” but spoke like one and when he did, as Craig Barnes writes, “he uncovered reality to expose eternal truths.”

I am also impressed with our Lord’s courage. When confronted by an evil spirit that wanted to silence him, he did not back down. Neither did he look around for the leaders of the synagogue to get him out of a touchy situation. He dealt with it right then

and there and it appears that his purpose was two-fold. He wanted to silence the voice of evil and liberate a man from bondage. Both demanded strength, courage and fortitude, for not only would he have to stand up to the forces of evil, but also the powerful forces in that synagogue that considered ancient rules more sacred than people.

One thing I have noticed about the miracles that Jesus performed was that on many occasions he had to break religious rules to help people. He certainly did on this day. Jesus healed this man on the Sabbath, which was strictly forbidden, and he did not do it in some obscure place where it might have gone unnoticed, but in the synagogue where the rules were diligently taught and rigidly enforced. That took courage! Why did he do it? For Jesus, helping people was his mission and the most important thing in his life, certainly more important than upholding ceremonial rituals or religious rules.

One more thing that impresses me about Jesus in this story is the way he used his authority. His words were transformational. When he spoke, good things happened. His words inspired people to make changes that made life better for themselves and their neighbors. They brought healing and hope as it became evident that he was the Lord over all that seeks to spoil and destroy.

They still do. The same One that used his power to give this possessed man new life is here to help us overcome those things that possess us, including destructive habits, guilt, fear, worry, grief, greed, deceit, hatred, intolerance, hypocrisy and racism.

Preacher, professor and author, Tom Long, highlighted the transforming power of Jesus' words in his sermon, "An Understated Masterpiece." "If truth be known, we all hunger in our hearts for somebody to teach us something which will transform our lives by its power. We attend events, from soccer matches to cocktail parties, and leave amused but no wiser. We sit at the feet of teachers and gather knowledge, from the value of pi to the theories of Freud, and we leave informed but unchanged. We long to know the truth which does not merely set us thinking, but sets us free." Jesus' words do that.

Where did Jesus get his wisdom, courage and power? I believe they were gifts from God and he knew that. This is why he spent a lot of time in prayer, cultivating a close relationship to his Father.

Why did God bestow these gifts on Jesus? I believe He did it because Jesus' heart and priorities were in the right place. The welfare of his neighbors was the most important thing in his life and the pursuit of justice and peace was his top priority.

You know what this means, don't you? God will grant wisdom, courage and power to anyone whose heart and priorities are in the right place. This includes you and me.

"What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" the unclean spirit asked him in the synagogue that day. These questions need to be asked in this place of worship today, especially the first one. Don't be afraid to ask it. As a matter of fact, I encourage you to do so and assure you that Jesus has not come to destroy, but to build up and heal. He has come to grant wisdom, courage and power to anyone that wants a better life and works to make life better for his or her neighbors. Could that be you? I hope so.