

“Hear and Heed”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 28, 2024 - Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

[Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28](#)

We heard in today’s gospel lesson that “[the people] were astounded at [Jesus’] teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes” (Mark 1:22). According to the gospel, Jesus’ teaching with authority was not expected. What the people had come to expect, instead, from their scribes, who were professional Hebrew Bible experts, were not lessons taught with authority. So when they unexpectedly received the authoritative word from the one who was formerly a common craftsman from Nazareth, it astounded them.

Our world today is filled with people claiming to possess such astounding authority. Each day, especially in an election year, such as the one we are now in, we are bombarded by messages through all sorts of media from politicians, or those supporting them, telling us that they, and certainly not their opponents, are unique possessors of this kind of authority, and that we should not only vote for them, but that we should be amazed by their every word, and that if we would just hear and heed their word, all of our problems would disappear, life would be wonderful, and we would all live happily ever after.

Our politicians are hardly alone in pushing their claims of authority and ability to fix things upon us. They are joined by the masses of professional political commentators, newspaper columnists, sports pundits, music critics, film analysts, financial advisors, health experts, psychologists, counsellors, astrophysicists, astrologers, preachers, podcasters, and rock stars, who all lavish their “expert” opinions about everything upon us. And with the advent of social media, all of us who aren’t professional experts on anything still get to join the rock stars and others in pretending that we are experts as we can broadcast to the planet our “life hacks” and other opinions about anything and everything (a recent survey of children and youth in Great Britain found that becoming a social media influencer was their fourth most popular desired career path, behind only becoming a professional athlete, teacher, or veterinarian).

In the time of Jesus, he didn't offer his voice amidst a sea of everyday experts, but his words were in competition with the scribes and others who were revered as having an authoritative opinion on living. The scribes were joined by many other religious teachers and leaders of differing schools of religious thought in being the influencers of their day that sought to convince people that their way of seeing things was the right way, and that all others were understanding things -- and living -- the wrong way.

Among the cacophony of religious teachings, Jesus offered his message, and it immediately stirred things up. Some, who found his words to set them free, received his message as a long-awaited, heavenly gift; others, especially the religious and political authorities, found him to pose a dangerous threat to their own grasp of power over people.

And they were right. Jesus was a great threat, for his ability to influence was unlike theirs. Jesus possessed a power and an authority that was higher than their own. In their world, in which they believed that there were spirits that were more powerful than mere human beings, like the unclean spirit of today's reading that possessed and had power over a person, Jesus commanded the spirits to move and they did. The scribes and other religious authorities had power over people, but did not have the ability to set free those who were bound by more-powerful spiritual forces. But Jesus tapped into a power that the human influencers of his day did not have access to, a power that was greater than even the most-powerful unclean spirits, and he used that power to set people free, like his ancestor Moses, who, long before Jesus, was Israel's prophet, teacher, and deliverer.

The good news we celebrate today is that Jesus came to offer God's delivering, transforming word to the people of his day and to the people of our day as well. The one who was greater in power than both the human and spiritual authorities remains greater than these. And just as Jesus worked in his day to set people free from their human and spiritual oppressors, Jesus is still at work in our world, setting us free from what imprisons us.

Thanks be to God, for there is much from which we need deliverance today! Unclean spirits are all around us, and we freely invite so many of them to live inside of us. We welcome in so many unclean, destructive ideas, and we hold on

to so many of these that we inherited or learned in our youth (or more recently), and it often seems like these so often rule our minds and actions. So many of us are held in bondage by substances we consume that cause us harm, but that we seem unable to break free from on our own. And so many times, our good spirits have been so crushed by our losses, disappointments, and failures, that space has been opened up in our hearts for the unclean spirits to come in and roost.

The good news is that the message of Christ comes to us today and every day to set us free from what binds each of us and others in our world. Christ's enduring call to love God and love people, including ourselves, is unbinding and transformational, creating us to be people who are more unbound and able to continue Christ's work of setting others free in our world. And whatever else helps us on our journey of becoming more loving and unbound, whether through a counselor, author, wise friend, online influencer, or any other source, is a gift of God to be embraced and celebrated.

May Christ work miracles in each of our lives today, setting us free from what binds us. May we be about Christ's work in the world, influencing people in all spheres of our lives with acts of love and working however we are able to dismantle all that binds people and keeps them from enjoying God's peace. And as we work to grow Christ's just and peaceful realm in the world, may Christ's reign of peace grow within each of our hearts. Amen.