**Speaking with Authority**

**Text: Mark 1:21-22**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Text: When the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught…as one with authority.

Some of us remember – back in the 1960’s or ‘70’s – when folks would talk going off to *find* themselves. Some young adults would take a year to travel or hike or live in a commune or whatever in order to find out who they really were. It was really a luxury of middle class, well-educated, youth. Some of you all had to work for a living; some of you all were putting your lives on the line in Vietnam; while some of the folks that I grew-up with were off *finding* themselves.

It’s easy to laugh at now, and to the extent that it was a self-centered exercise by well-off, privileged mostly white people, it *ought* to be ridiculed. Now don’t get me wrong: there *is* something to be said for discerning who you are, at your core. But you don’t have to run away to a commune to do it. There are spiritual exercises like daily prayer or a 40 day retreat that can help you to discern who God made you to be. There are tools for discerning your spiritual gifts that can help you to see what God made you to do. These are among the ways that we can discern who we really are; among the ways that we can see our *authentic* self.

Jesus was all about authenticity. Especially in Mark’s gospel, this is one of Jesus’ primary concerns. He wants folks to know who he really is and he wants them to discern who they really are and he wants them to know what the Kingdom of God is all about. Which is to say, he wants everyone to know what it means to live authentic lives together in authentic community. That’s what God has intended for *all* of God’s children and for *all* of God’s creatures since the beginning of time.

Who are you, as an individual? Who are we, as a community? If we can answer those questions, and then act in a way that is consistent with the answer, then we’ve gone a long way toward speaking and acting with authority. We’ve gone a long way to doing the very thing that Jesus did.

In Mark’s gospel, Jesus does it first on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. That’s where he encountered some fishermen, and he said to them – with authority – “Follow me.” And they did.

Jesus went a bit further along the shore, to Capernaum. Walked into the synagogue. There he taught – with authority – and the people listened.

Just then Jesus saw a man with an unclean spirit. And he said to the spirit – with authority – “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the spirit obeyed.

So what does it mean to speak and act with authority? Well, let’s look at the word. The Greek word that Mark uses is *exousia*, which has to do with – yes – authority; but also power, capacity, and mastery. Now hang on to that, because we’re going to look at a couple of English words, and then come back to the Greek.

The first word, of course, is *authority*, which means: the power or right to give orders, make decisions or enforce obedience.

The second word is *authentic*, which means: *genuine*, and it has to do also with the words *real*, and *true*.

Note that both words share the Greek root *auto*, which means: self.

In other words, to be authentic is to be your genuine or real self, and to speak or act with authority is to draw upon your real self in what you say and do.

Or, to put that another way: to speak or teach or act with authority is to speak or teach or act from the core of who you really are; who God made you to be.

And the thing is, when you speak or act out of the core of who you really are, when you speak or act with authenticity and authority, you tap into a reservoir of inner power that you never dreamed was there. Baseball players, when they’re standing at the plate, sometimes talk about “staying within themselves.” In other words, they don’t allow themselves to be distracted by the crowd, or the pitcher trying to look mean, or their own fear of messing-up. They stay within themselves, they stay in touch with that deep core of skill that God and good training have placed within them, and they stay in touch with an inner peace that is at the core of all of us if we go deep enough; they stay within themselves and – BAM – they’re more likely to hit that ball with power, or to put that ball exactly where it needs to be for them to get on base or advance a runner. There is power and capacity when we stay within ourselves; when we speak or act out of that core of who really are. We can maintain a certain mastery over the situation.

Hmmm… power and capacity and mastery: we’ve heard those words already this morning. These are implications of that Greek word *exousia* which means, of course, *authority*. In terms of both etymology and experience, we can see that to be authentic, to act and to speak out of the core of who we really are, is to act with authority. And to act with authority is to act with power; to act with authority is to get things done. People and demons alike sit-up and take notice and often do the thing that you’re asking or telling them to do when you are being your authentic self. Jesus said, “Follow me,” and those fishermen did. Jesus said, “Come out,” and the demons obeyed.

It was close to 20 years ago that I began to understand this. It was a Sunday afternoon in late January, and I was taking part in an ecumenical event that marked the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. A group of Christians representing many different denominations made their way from a Greek Orthodox church to a Lutheran and a Roman Catholic and a United Church and finally to an Episcopal church. Brief liturgies were observed in each church before the group moved on to the next one. Well, some members of the Greek Orthodox church were not at all happy that their congregation had agreed to participate in this event. When the ecumenical group left that first liturgy, these dissenters left with us: yelling at us, screaming that their church was the only Church. They kept up their angry demonstration all the way through the Lutheran liturgy until we reached the Roman Catholic cathedral. There, standing in the church door, was a very short priest. As the protestors approached him he calmly said, “This is a house of prayer, not a house of protest. If you’ve come to pray then you are welcome to enter. If you’ve come to protest, then I must ask you to leave.” And the demonstrators shut their mouths, turned around and walked away.

That priest spoke with authority. It’s the authority that flows from being true to who you really are at your core; who God has made you to be and *authorized* you to be.

Now of course there are other ways to get people to do what you want them to do, but they often involve coercion, or intimidation, or even violence or at least the *threat* of violence. In the Church we often get people to do what we want them to do by lying. “Oh, it’s just a little job; won’t take you but a few minutes each week.” Folks have said yes to that and have been stuck with a job for the rest of their lives.

The beauty of speaking with authority is that you can get things done that need to be done, that ought to be done, that for the sake of God’s Kingdom ought to be done, and you can do so by being completely honest.

It begins by being true to one’s self. Shakespeare said, “To thine own self be true” and Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.” Same concept. When you act out of the core of who you really are there is the freedom, there is the power, there is the capacity to get things done.

And this is not only true of individuals. It is also true of congregations. Doing ministry, serving the Kingdom, developing *capacity* to serve the Kingdom begins when a congregation knows itself and acts out of that knowledge. This too is acting with authority.

For the last 30 years it has been assumed that the only way for a church to grow is to form a Praise Band, put-up a screen and have a so-called contemporary service. And, for a lot of churches, it worked: If it was true to who they really were. If they could do it authentically. But if you tried that in a place like First Christian-Bloomington, for example, it would be a disaster. It wouldn’t fit with the architecture and it wouldn’t fit with the ethos of the congregation. Which is not to say that only classical music works there; they’ve having some success with a Friday night jazz service. My point is that if a congregation is going to grow, if a congregation is going to serve the Kingdom, it must know who it is at its core. It will only proclaim the Gospel with *authority* if it acts *authentically*.

And so, the question for First Christian Church-Bedford is this: Who are we? Who has God made us to be? With what gifts have we been uniquely equipped to serve God’s Kingdom? We’re dead in the water unless we can answer those questions. We’re just flailing around, mimicking other churches, or perhaps mimicking a vague memory of who we once were but are no longer, unless we can answer those questions and then act on that knowledge; act with authority and act to God’s glory on that knowledge.

Who are we? Who has God made us to be? With what gifts have we been uniquely equipped to serve God’s Kingdom? These are among the questions that we will ask ourselves, and among the questions to which we will get answers, as we enter our visioning/discerning/planning process next month.

Telling Our Story/Future Glory: that’s what I think we should call it. And it begins with a fancy name – Appreciative Inquiry – which really just means telling one another short stories – offering verbal snapshots – of this church, about what it means to each one of us, about how it has nurtured each one of us and formed us – how this church has formed *you*, *all* of you – to be the warm, caring, faithful people that you are.

Not only will that help us to proclaim the Gospel with authority – to move into the future with authority – it’s also going to be fun. I don’t know about you all, but I love sitting around sharing snapshots. And then we can pick-out the common threads from such stories, and that will help us to see who we really are, and what we’re called to do and be.

One more story, and maybe I’ve told you all this one before, but even if I have I now understand it in a new light. I was playing baseball one day at church camp. And I was in my usual position, in the outfield, as far away from home plate as possible so I could do as little damage as possible because, as much as I love baseball, I’m a lousy player. I was on the high school track team – I could run a pretty good mile – but otherwise I was and continue to be a lousy athlete. So I’m playing deep left field, and this dude with power comes up to the plate, and he hits a *prodigious* blast, and the only one who has even a prayer of catching the ball is – *me*. So I take off after this ball – because, remember, I could run – and I’m thinking, “I’m going to make this look good.” Didn’t have a clue what I was going to do if I actually got under the ball, but I was going to get in position anyway. Now, what you need to understand is not only was a good runner, I *loved* to run. It’s like that great line from the movie Chariots of Fire when the lead character, Eric Liddle, says that when he’s running, “I can feel God’s pleasure.” That was it was like as I sprinted across that outfield: I was so focused on the pure joy of God’s pleasure that I forgot about the fact that I didn’t have a clue how to catch a ball. So I got under that fly ball and I put up my hands and – *BAM* – there, in my hands, was the ball! Couldn’t believe my eyes. Neither could the batter. He was rounding 2nd base with no doubt in his mind that he’d just hit a home run.

The point is that when you’re focused on who you really are, and you’re enjoying it, you’ll find the God-given power to do *amazing* things! That’s what Jesus demonstrated, when he taught and he acted and he cast out those demons…with authority. Amen.