

A New Teaching

Ep 4 Yr B Mark 1:21-28 January 31, 2021

I remember playing outside as a boy when my aunt came out and lit a cigarette on the front step. She noticed me and said “This is a dirty habit. Don’t ever start smoking because it is so hard to quit.” She then puffed on her smoke for awhile before going back inside. A few years later my uncle announced out of the blue “I quit smoking. It is the hardest thing I have ever done and I’m hoping this time I can stay off the cigarettes.” At which point he turned to me and said. “Don’t ever start smoking.” I heard what both my aunt and my uncle said to me but honestly only one of them make a lasting impression.

This morning’s gospel lesson follows the dramatic story of the call of the disciples. And to better understand what happens as Jesus teaches in the synagogue we need to keep in mind that Jesus is preaching that the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe the good news. And that as he proclaims the gospel of God lives are being changed.

Now Mark tells us that Jesus is teaching in the synagogue and everyone is talking about how his message seems so authentic and exciting. Some of that is because Jesus isn’t relating what he has heard, what someone else has taught him or told him is true, as many of the scribes and religious leaders of the people did. No, Jesus preaches what he knows and believes to be true and the people listening can tell the difference. His words are confident, they are powerful, they are reaching into the lives of his listeners. Jesus teaches with authority.

And while we’re not told exactly what Jesus is saying I think it is safe to assume he is proclaiming the same message we hear elsewhere in the gospels. He is telling of God’s love, God’s grace, God’s forgiveness, and he is calling people to open themselves to God and experience a new life. A powerful and life changing message. An invitation to begin fresh as one of God’s people. And that creates a buzz.

But I need to pause on that point for a moment. My social media feed is filled with people who seem confident, authoritative, and who are telling me that this or that is good for me and I should believe it. Friends, family, colleagues, all have an opinion and seem to be so certain and sure of themselves. And sometimes what they say makes sense to me and makes me wonder if it could be true.

But the problem is that often the advice, direction, and wisdom they give is at odds with what others say that makes sense and makes me wonder if it could be true. So

how can we tell when something is real, authentic, and good? How can we find the words of truth in this world of so many lies and so much nonsense?

Now I realized there was a difference between what my aunt said and what my uncle said about smoking. While the words were pretty much the same- that smoking is bad and I should never start- the difference for me was in their actions. One was smoking and not even trying to stop. The other shared how difficult it was to quit and that example made an impression on me. Because words are good, they are important, but when they are added to behaviour, when actions follow them and support them and match with them, that is when everything changes.

In our gospel story people in the synagogue are curious and interested in Jesus because his message is engaging. And then something happens which transforms those words. A person who is suffering comes to Jesus. And I know the language Mark uses, about unclean spirits and the conversation about knowing, isn't language easy for us to relate to. But let's just focus on the fact that someone in pain, afflicted, comes to Jesus and Jesus cures him. Because at its heart that is what happens.

The person is in pain and Jesus releases them from their suffering. The bad that is happening to them ends and something good, something new, begins. Which means that the words that Jesus is speaking, the teaching of God's love and grace that he is sharing, takes form in the world before the very eyes of the onlookers. And that is when the crowd does more than buzz or be astounded, they start to talk openly about how amazing Jesus is and they start to believe that they are witnessing something incredible.

When the words and the actions connect. When what is said and what is done are the same. When the words explain the actions and the actions illustrate the words then we see, we experience, and we are shown a truth, a powerful possibility, for our lives and our world. That is what happens for the crowd that day. They had been listening and were thinking Jesus had some good things to say. But when he heals, when those words impact the life of someone that is when they go wild. Because his actions show them in no uncertain terms what he is saying about God. And theory became reality, possibility became potential, and the wonder about the good news becomes hope for some and belief for others.

But we're not done yet. Because there is a problem saying that as long as the words match the actions that we have everything we need to know what is good and right and

the way we should follow as people of faith. For while it is easy to see that people telling lies should be ignored and that people who say one thing and do another should be dismissed when someone is confident, when they are sincere, when they walk the walk and talk the talk that does not mean that they are right.

There are many people, sometimes very good people, who believe harmful things and live their lives according to destructive beliefs. We can see the results of that in the chaos south of the border and honestly in many places closer to home. Which bring us to something in the lesson we often overlook.

Jesus talks about the kingdom of heaven and God's grace, he shows that through the healing, and, and this is important, his words and his actions change life, change the world, for the better. The man who is suffering is healed. The person afflicted is set free.

Because words are good, actions are good, and both words and actions together are great- but it is the effect of those words and actions where we see God at work. That is how we know the way Jesus opens for us. Not because it sounds good, not because it has an effect, but because those words and that effect transforms us, empowers us, and brings us closer to God.

The words of Jesus are powerful. The gospel is filled with promise and hope. And as Christians those are the words we are to know, to let rest in our minds and hearts to guide our lives. So that what we say and do are examples of grace and love, compassion and generosity. And that makes us witnesses to the gospel message. That helps people see what we mean, know what it is we are talking about in a way that is unmistakable.

But, for us to be lights shining in the world, for us to show the good news through our lives, we need to let those words, let those actions, change us and the world. We need to forgive and be forgiven, we need to care for those in need and be cared for in our need. We need to reach out beyond ourselves and where we are comfortable and we need to give of ourselves expecting nothing in return. Because when we do that our actions of faith change us, change the people around us, and then, then people can see the truth of the gospel not simply in words, not merely in actions, but through the way the good news of God uplifts and reshapes the world into something better.