

Sermon, St. David's, Mark 1:21-28 Epiphany 4B 2024 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

We're still in the first chapter of Mark, and so much has happened just in this first chapter, because as I've been saying week to week, Mark is concise in his gospel. So far in chapter one, Jesus was baptized, driven into the wilderness, and then called his first disciples. Today, we hear about his first act of public ministry, teaching in a Capernaum synagogue and then removing an unclean spirit from a man.

This passage can speak to us about authority. Jesus' authority is questioned by those present in the synagogue. "They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes." The scribes in this instance were people something like me. I've been to seminary and more than twenty years ago went through our diocesan ordination process, which was somewhat grueling. But having done those things, I now have the diocesan stamp of approval authority so get to stand up here and talk to you. We also have a seminary-trained lay preacher, Tammy Shackelford, who also has approval of the diocese, but they make me read it first before she proclaims it from the pulpit.

Jesus, however, did not have someone's stamp of approval, He was an unknown when he walked into that synagogue and started teaching—but after the events we heard about today, we learn that he quickly became famous. We read that the faithful who were gathered in the synagogue were astonished and amazed.

Jesus didn't need a certificate stamped by someone in purple in order to bring people closer to God.

Our beloved Episcopal Church is a fan of authority. As a priest, I don't have authority to do an exorcism, which is what Jesus does today. Only bishops can do that in our church. Once, before we kept the doors locked, someone came into a vestry meeting one night and asked me to go exorcise a demon from someone in their car. The vestry and I were flustered, and I explained that I could not do that. But I felt like I should have done more.

I also don't have the church authority to confirm people: a bishop has to do that, too. And while as a priest I can bless unction, the oil we use on third Sundays to anoint people for healing, the special oil we use at baptisms has to be blessed by a bishop.

Priests and deacons are authorized to read the Gospel in church, with preference given to deacons. Deacons also have preference to set the table for communion and lead the dismissal. But deacons aren't authorized to bless the communion elements.

Passages like today's make all of these authority rules in our church frustrating to me. Jesus wasn't authorized to do certain things in a synagogue, but that didn't stop him. He taught

and people listened, and an unclean spirit cried out, “What have you to do with us?” While others wondered who this uncredentialed rabbi was, the unclean spirit immediately recognized him.

What do you make of that?

Before I was ordained, when I would go to diocesan events such as our Annual Council that is coming up in a couple weeks, I felt like clerical collars were a sign of a club I was trying to get in. I resented them, and vowed that I was not going to be a person who wore one everywhere. But when I was newly ordained, I wore a shirt with a clerical collar to everything, because my boss the rector did and advised me to do the same. It helped people recognize our authority, he said.

I don't wear mine as much now, partly because with my various recent illnesses it has become a little uncomfortable, but also because I still struggle with that sign. I'm not as young as I was when I first got here, so I think most of you know who I am whether or not I have a plastic tab tucked into my collar. If I visit someone in the hospital I try to wear a clerical collar, because it's easily recognizable, as my old boss pointed out, and gets me faster access to places like the ICU.

What could I do to be recognized as a holy person without trappings of stoles and chasubles and clerical collars? What could you do?

Unless a demon shows up, getting recognized by our ability to exorcise is probably not realistic. But Jesus, despite his lack of diplomas, captures the attention of the people gathered to worship. Presumably he does this through his teaching as well as his actions.

I want to live my life in such a way that people recognize me as Christian and loving. Unfortunately, many people no longer associate Christianity with love. We're seen as judgmental and clique-y.

I'm grateful to serve a church that looks like love to me. When I was out last year for seven and a half months, Dana Blackman picked up my dog Pepper and took her to the office on Thursdays, the day I used to take her, because I was writing my sermon. Pepper could hear her car coming from two blocks away, and would spring around barking wildly with joy.

That action showed me what kind of Christian Dana Blackman is.

As church members, we can show love to each other through taking a meal to someone having a hard time, or simply lending them an ear. We also are called to reach beyond these walls to people in the community, which some do by taking a meal to the HomeAgain men's shelter downtown every month.

Our Annual Meeting follows this service, and we'll look at other ways we have served each other here at St. David's as well as in the larger community. I hope that no matter how long you've been coming to St. David's, and even if you did not bring a dish to share, you will come take a look at the life of our parish as we reflect on the past year and look ahead to the current one. Maybe you will get an idea of how you can show that you are a Christian even without outward signs of your authority, or maybe you can tell us a new way that we can do this as a church.