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Psalm 111

Mark 1:21-28

AUTHORITY

Compare and contrast – that is the instruction for many a test where the student has to analyze a situation. How is this thing or person like something else? What are the ways in which there is a difference? Compare and contrast.

As we read through the gospel accounts about Jesus, we can end up seeking to compare and contrast him with ourselves. How is he like you and me? How are we like him? How is Jesus different from us and how are we different from him? I guess one measure of spiritual growth would be for the list of comparisons between Jesus and us to grow in length while the list of differences diminishes.

In our passage from Mark today, there were people in a synagogue who upon hearing Jesus teach “were astounded,” because he is described as teaching “them as one having authority and not as the scribes.” I feel a little sorry for these scribes, who when compared and contrasted with Jesus, they typically end up where I would be: on the contrast list. But perhaps we can learn from the less than compelling example of the scribes so that we can move somewhat closer to the life and authority Jesus exhibited.

First a little background: the main business of the scribes was teaching and interpreting the religious law. They advised individuals concerning what was in keeping with the Hebrew commandments and what was not. However, the scribes were part of the power structure of the time, and frankly their interest resided not so much in the plain meaning of the religious law than in the preservation of the system and their place within it. Their interpretations at times served their own interests rather than God’s. They were well-educated – I’m sure they taught with sophistication. Yet there seem to have been times that they stayed away from the main matters of a life of faith and majored in the minor details of religious law.

Such learned discussions sometimes serve as little more than scanty fig leaves trying to cover the nakedness of inconsistent lives.

What then is the source of authority that Jesus exhibited? Scholarship and knowledge are important, but devoted wisdom goes beyond that. It gives me pause that Jesus probably lacked the kind of formal education that would be required to be an ordained leader in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). A consistency in word and deed certainly adds power. Telling someone, ‘Do as I say and not as I do,’ doesn’t make for a compelling witness. Deep conviction or passion that is conveyed can be forceful if it is matched with substance in one’s teachings. Mark’s gospel doesn’t indicate what Jesus was teaching at that Sabbath service that is described in our reading. However, religious teaching that illumines the big questions of life, connects with others where they find themselves, and is consistent with the truths of scripture has great power. What do you think? Does the integrity of our congregation’s message and our lives of faith and faithfulness indicate that our authority is only a trickle or is it the strong stream of life that God would intend for us?

After Mark indicates the contrast between the scribes and Jesus, another stark contrast is presented. Even while Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, a man described as having an unclean spirit begins to cry out. It was an invasion of sacred time and space. Now if we go back just a few verses before our lesson began, Mark describes the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus at his baptism. So here is a clear contrast: Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit and this man is filled with an unclean spirit. It is an unclean spirit with control over the man that blurts out: “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.” Perhaps the scribes would have responded to the man’s ‘unclean’ status with an order for the man to leave the sacred space. But Jesus responds differently. Many who were in that worshiping community probably didn’t know at that point that the unclean spirit’s description of Jesus was accurate. Yet it was a spirit alienated from and hostile to God. Its primary concern is simply for itself. It also occupies and oppresses the man – it is a controlling force. It acknowledges Jesus as the Holy One of God, but does not submit to him as Lord.

Compare and contrast – unfortunately in those areas of our lives where we are less than fully open to God’s will, then we can be compared with the unclean spirit. We recognize the Holy One of God, but there are parts of us which are alienated from and hostile to the ways of God. There are ways we are far too much like the scribes and the unclean spirit that Mark describes. So, does that leave any room for hope for you and for me?

It certainly does if we get a bit further in the story. For we discover that Jesus had liberating power over that which was hostile to God’s ways. He cast out that spirit even in the context of worship and he can do the same toward any force within us that is resistant to God’s good will for our lives. In scripture, the mentally ill or those who were suffering from epilepsy were generally described by terminology indicating an unclean spirit. We too may have spirits or attributes that can cause us to resist God’s will. It may be a spirit of resentment or false guilt, a spirit of superiority or addiction or something else. When the people saw Jesus liberate the man in the Capernaum synagogue, they viewed his ministry as unprecedented. For here was someone who taught with such authority that things happened – people were moved to action, and others were moved toward wholeness. Previously, they had heard plenty of talk, but had not seen actions that so matched powerful words. His integrity was unimpeachable. They found it to be truly amazing.

Gregory Boyle is a Jesuit priest who works with gang members in Los Angeles to try to get them to move in a different direction. He oversees a non-profit business called Homeboy Industries, that produces certain products, but primarily is a job-training ground for former gang members and drug dealers. A young man named Chuy had found a new start in life through Father Gregory’s program. He had gone through the maximum 18 months of the program and with help, he had found a good job. On his last day before starting his new job, he asked to address the trainees. “All of you,” he began, “are diamonds covered in dust.” He choked up a bit, then said, “Your dust can get wiped off here.”

After Chuy gets on his feet, he sees Father Gregory again and tells the priest that lately he’s “been having one-on-ones with ...you know... God.” Then, as someone who had encountered a lot of unreliable people, the former gang member

says in reference to God, “I don’t understand it – The Dude shows up.” The priest starts to chuckle, but then he sees that Chuy is serious, as he continues, “I mean....why would he do that? After all thebad I’ve done, why would (God) show up?”¹

We too, by the power of God, could become even more of a church whose deeds so matched what we affirmed, that the surrounding community would look on with amazement. Our lives could come closer to communicating the authority of Jesus Christ instead of obscuring it. But we should take note that Mark describes the scribes as resistant to Christ throughout his gospel account. Sometimes a spirit of religiosity can be a bigger impediment than even an unclean spirit is.

But neither one is too great a challenge for the unprecedented ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shows up with powerful compassion and does more than just dust us off. We open ourselves to his power, not just by calling him ‘Lord’ in name only, but by submitting ourselves to his lordship. When we submit ourselves to him, that which oppresses us, and that which oppresses others through us, can get purged. We can then be empowered to live in new ways. It all happens when we give Christ unprecedented authority in every part of our lives. It can even happen in the context of a worship service when we acknowledge that all power and authority rightly belong to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. As a source of hope for us, there is actually no comparison.

¹ Gregory Boyle, Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017.