

TEXT: Mark 1:21-28
THEME: Jesus teaches with authority
SUBJECT: Teaching
TITLE: The Holy One

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
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Messiah Moravian
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It is not so much their subjects that the great teachers teach us, says Frederick Buechner, as it is themselves.

Buechner describes James Muilenburg, one of his teachers at Union Theological Seminary in NY, who left so powerful and lasting an impression on him: “He was an angular man with thinning white hair, staring eyes, and a nose and chin which at times seemed so close to touching that they gave him the face of a good witch.”

The largest lecture hall in the school was always packed for his introductory Old Testament course. Students brought friends. Friends brought friends. People stood in the back when the chairs ran out. Up and down the whole length of the aisle he would stride as he chanted the war songs, the taunt songs, the dirges of ancient Israel.

With his body stiff, his knees bent, his arms scarecrow far to either side, he never merely taught the Old Testament but *was* the Old Testament. His face tilted and his eyes aghast, he would be Yahweh, creating the heavens and the earth, and when he called out, “Let there be *light!*” there would *be* light, great floods of it reflected in the hundreds of faces watching him in that enormous room.

When he gave his final lecture, a number of students from the Jewish seminary across the street attended it and, before entering the great room, left their shoes in the corridor outside to indicate that the ground on which they stood with him was holy ground.

Mark doesn’t tell us *what* Jesus taught, just the impression Jesus made: “I know you are the Holy One of God.” Throughout Mark’s gospel, he refers to Jesus as “the teacher.” In fact, Jesus is the only one called “teacher” by Mark, and only Jesus and those he authorizes are represented as teaching. Mark, however, doesn’t give us a “Sermon on the Mount” as Matthew does. Some speculate Mark wrote in a hurry for people in a hurry to escape persecution—no time for details.

Another reason is plausible. Christianity is not an object of speculation, a philosophy of life, about which endless arguments lead either to faith or rejection. One becomes a Christian by imitating the teacher’s life. Knowing and understanding follow following the teacher.

You cannot audit Christianity to see if it is right for you. You can feed the hungry crowd, offer hospitality to the outcast, comfort the dying, act as a “first responder” like the Good Samaritan, learn to forgive the prodigal, and love your enemies. Wait! What? Ideas, arguments do not answer any of these needs. We must be an answer.

Jesus teaches as one having authority. His authority is not like the scribes who are authorized by the synagogue to teach. Jesus' authority comes from a firm and conscious resolution to be willing to sacrifice everything, even his life, for his cause. True authority is present when truth is the cause. Jesus addresses himself to the conscience, not to understanding, intelligence, profundity—to the human being, not to the professor.

“Every morning when you wake up,” James Muilenburg told his students, “before you reaffirm your faith in the majesty of a loving God, before you say *I believe* for another day, read the *Daily News* with its record of the latest crimes and tragedies and then see if you can honestly say it again.” He didn't or couldn't or wouldn't resolve, intellectualize, evade, the tensions of his faith but lived those tensions out, torn almost in two by them at times.

We live in a world of crime and tragedy, in a world of lies and deceit, and that world lives in us. The deep trouble our world is in is the deep trouble in us. We are our loves and hates, our fears of death and fears of life, our anxieties, our longings, our pride, our dark doubts. The terrors the world “out there” are the terrors that possess us.

“All the conflicts and contradictions of life must find a resolution in us,” argues Richard Rohr, “before we can resolve anything out there. Only the forgiven can forgive, only the healed can heal, only those who stand in daily need of mercy can offer mercy to others.

“Don't waste any time dividing the world into the good guys and the bad guys. *Hold them together in your own soul—where they are anyway—and you will have held together the whole world.* You will have overcome the great divide—in one place of spacious compassion.”

“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know you are the Holy One of God?” “There is only one kind of violence which captures the Kingdom of heaven,” writes Thomas Merton, “—the violence which imposes peace on the depths of the soul in the midst of passion. The violence is order itself, and is produced in us by the authority and the voice of the God of peace, speaking from His holy place.”

Merton is referring to inordinate passions that possess us and destroy us, the passions the holy cannot abide. In the Christian tradition, renunciation, sacrifice, and generous self-denial are essential to becoming like the teacher who emptied himself of divine rights to become a servant of all. The purpose of self-denial is to liberate the mind and will so that all the energies of body and spirit can be dedicated to God in a way appropriate to the particular circumstances of one's life.

Christianity is not an explanation of why bad things happen to good people. Christianity is a call to embody the image and likeness of Christ, to become fully human. To become a saint is not to become less human but more human. Grace builds on nature not by suppressing instinct but by healing and elevating it to a spiritual level. To be a saint is to know a greater capacity for concern,

for suffering, for understanding, for sympathy, and also for humor, for joy, for appreciation of the good and beautiful things of life.

PRAYER

Blessed are you, O God of the Universe,
for you have bound us together in a common life
on this fragile planet.

We confess and offer before you
our misperceptions, our hatred, our bigotry, and our deceit.
Grant us understanding that is grounded in love,
and reconciliation that grows out of humility.

Grant us a mind to know you,
a heart to seek you,
wisdom to find you,
faithful perseverance in waiting for you,
and a hope of finally embracing you.