

“With Authority!”

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

January 28, 2018

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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You don't even have to know anything about football, never mind like it, to know that the Super Bowl is played next Sunday evening. As today's *“Grace Notes”* points out, this game represents an opportunity for all of us to join churches around the country by collecting food and money for the 28th annual *“Souper Bowl of Caring.”* Your gifts will go to Milford's Beth-El Center to help feed those who don't have a bowl of soup to eat. Please bring canned and dry goods and financial offerings.

But back to the other Super Bowl. For the devotees, the Holy Grail is within your grasp! For football widows, this is the end of your mourning. Eight days and your husband will be resurrected from the dead! At least until next season.

It may not follow, however, that you (patiently waiting for him) will find him (patiently waiting for you). Consider Bob, a guy who, for years, hoped he might be able to go to the Super Bowl. Finally, to his surprise, this year he receives a free ticket from his company. When he arrives at the stadium he realizes why the ticket was free. It's in the last row in a corner of the stadium. He's closer to the Goodyear Blimp than to the field.

About half way through the first quarter, Bob notices an empty seat 10 rows off the field, right on the 50-yard line. He decides to take a chance and makes his way through the stadium and around security to the empty seat. As he sits down, he asks the gentleman next to the empty seat: *“Excuse me, sir, is anyone sitting here?”* The man says, *“No.”*

Now, very excited to be in such a great seat for the game, Bob says to the man next to him *“This is incredible! Who in their right mind would have a seat like this at the Super Bowl*

and not use it?" The man replies, "Well, actually, the seat belongs to me. I was supposed to come with my wife, but she passed away. This is the first Super Bowl we haven't been together since we married in 1967, the year of the very first Super Bowl."

Bob, feeling now a bit embarrassed, says hesitantly, *"That's really sad, but still, couldn't you find someone to take the seat? A relative or a close friend?" "No,"* the man answers, *"they're all at her funeral."*

Here's the kicker: "Do we have as single-minded a devotion in following Jesus as that man had to football?" In Mark's story today, Jesus is the one who speaks and acts "With Authority!" What does it mean for Jesus to have authority in our life?

Let's first set the stage for Mark's story. Jesus has entered Capernaum, a major customs town and center of the Galilean fishing industry at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. As you heard last week in Pastor Dani's message "Open Season," 1/3 of Jesus' disciples – 4 of 12 – were fishermen. Jesus will spend over half his ministry in this general area.

It is the Sabbath day and Jesus enters the synagogue. Over 35 years ago (1981) archeologists unearthed the foundations of a first-century synagogue, giving historical weight to Mark's witness. On the Sabbath an adult male would read from the Torah, the Hebrew law. Men who showed special ability in interpreting the Torah would be asked to speak. The story suggests Jesus was so regarded. His teaching is compared favorably to the scribes, who could quote chapter and verse but weren't as likely to apply the text to the nuances of people's life experience. It is worth noting that the Greek word for "authority," *exousia*, means "out of that which is one's

very own.” Jesus integrates God’s Word in the sacred text with the experience of his own life to witness to a living faith.

And that’s a good thing, ‘cause here comes trouble. It’s said that “Life is what happens when you’re making other plans” and that’s certainly true of this story. In the midst of Sabbath worship – Bible study and reflection, prayer and praise – comes a man who is emotionally disturbed. Steve (Wasko) and John (Leum) entered the sanctuary as they did this morning not only to call attention to the annual Valentine’s Dinner Dance but so that you might have that experience of disruption. Years ago in a former church we were auditioning for a new organist by having candidates play at morning worship. One candidate, after the offertory, came out into the center of the Nave and started ranting and raving. I finally had to engage her, calm her down and direct her back to the organ console. In the post-worship interview she appeared to have had no recollection of what had just happened! And, no, she did not get the position.

So imagine the shock when an emotionally disturbed person enters the Capernaum sanctuary. The shock would have the added weight of religious rebuke. A person with emotional illness would have been regarded as religiously “unclean” and, therefore, unwelcome in the house of God.

In Mark’s account the man with the disturbed spirit begins to rant and rave: “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.” Jesus acts decisively, casting out the troubled spirit and confirming the congregation’s belief that Jesus is one who speaks and acts with authority.

The man Jesus healed speaks for many, if not all, of us. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you

come to destroy us?" And we, in fact, dare to declare: "I know who you are: the Holy One of God."

Jesus' response, if those familiar with football will pardon the pun, is a two-point conversion. "Be silent, and come out of him." Let's look at each one.

"Be silent." When we are troubled it can be so hard to be silent. Yet the Lord God Almighty elsewhere says, "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10). In her book Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith, Kathleen Norris describes a game she played with elementary school children in which she would make a deal with them. "First you get to make noise," she would bargain, "and then you get to make silence." The time of noise was predictably chaotic, shouting, pounding and stomping. But the period of silence that followed was unexpectedly passionate and creative. Hear what some of the children wrote about it. One boy discovered that "Silence is a tree spreading its branches to the sun." One third-grader's poem turned into a prayer: "Silence is like spiders spinning their webs; it's like a silkworm making its silk. Lord, help me to know when to be silent." And then this gem: "Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go." It amazes me that for all the time, talent and treasure we put into the self-help gurus, we too often miss this simple medicine. Yoga and meditation instructors, in response to distraction or stress, often say simply "Breathe." If we are conscious of our breathing it is hard to be speaking. Breathe. Be silent.

But Jesus does not stop with silence. Silence prepares for conversion. Jesus reveals divine authority in saying to the unclean spirit, "Come out of him!" This is an exorcism with a different twist. Scholars who have studied the technique of exorcists in Jewish and Greek literature of the first century say that one common trait of these stories are details of the magical manipulation of the unclean spirit. Jesus, in contrast,

speaks directly to the spirit, ordering him out of the man, and the spirit obeys. Years ago a friend of mine spoke of her internal wrestling and called that negative and hurtful voice in her head her “disease voice.” “What do you say to your disease voice?” I asked. She replied, “I tell it to shut up.”

Jesus does that, and more, saying to the troubled negativity within us “Come out of him. Come out of her.” Let us hear this voice of Jesus speaking to our demons of anger and aggression....of compulsion and addiction....of bias and bigotry....of self-absorption and other-manipulation.

So I return to the question with which I began this message: ““Do we have as single-minded a devotion in following Jesus as that man had to football?” Do we respond? The unclean spirits did. They obeyed him. Are we not, in our health, even better able to do so? Will we obey him?

And how are we to obey him? Loving neighbors. Loving enemies. Forgiving, not once but seventy times seven. Speaking his name because when folks know we are one of his, we might just behave just a bit better, speak a bit kinder, listen a bit longer.

The late Jack Kemp was a U.S. Army veteran, an 18-year Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President George H.W. Bush and Vice-Presidential running mate for Senator Bob Dole in the 1996 Presidential election. His biography is beyond the scope of this sermon but worthy of a quick “Google” search for those so inclined, in that his political career reflected an ability and willingness to work with many different groups, a skill so sorely needed today; and a commitment to hold positions based on principle, not just party loyalty. Melding his faith as a Presbyterian Christian

with his government service he observed, “Democracy without morality is impossible.”

On this Sunday before the Super Bowl, however, I mention Congressman Kemp because he was also a quarterback for the Buffalo Bills. In that role, also, his faith is apparent. As we consider how we can respond in single-minded devotion to Jesus, we do well to consider Mr. Kemp’s reflections. He asked:

“Am I committed to the truth? Am I willing to let my flaws be revealed so that I can do something about them? Football taught me that talk is cheap. We could boast that we were going to do this or that, but it wasn’t until we were actually out on the playing field that the truth was revealed. We completed passes or we did not. We made it to the end zone or fell short. We won or we lost. And there was plenty of game footage to provide an objective appraisal of our strengths and weaknesses.”

Christian friends, football has its place. So do acts of charity and mercy, like the “Souper Bowl of Caring.” As Christians, our primary objective is to follow Jesus as his disciples, conforming our lives day by day to look more like his. As United Methodist Christians, our primary objective is “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” Let us, like our Lord, do so “with authority!”