



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, JANUARY 28, 2018  
DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20; PSALM 111; 1 CORINTHIANS 8:1-13; MARK 1:21-28

## CHIASMS OF COMPASSION

### *Mark 1: 21-28*

- 21 Jesus and the disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.*
- 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the Scribes.*
- 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,*  
*24 and he cried 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."*
- 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!"*
- 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.*
- 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him."*
- 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.*

Life has a way of presenting as a series of decision points, moments of truth, or forks in the road, with choices to be made which will lead to further decisions. It's been a century since Robert Frost published *The Road Not Taken*, but its sentiment still rings true to our postmodern ears:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth...<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Frost, Robert. *The Road Not Taken*. Full poem at <http://www.bartleby.com/119/1.html>

When Jesus walks into the synagogue at Capernaum, presumably to worship as he had countless times before, on the banks of his Galilean Sea, he is presented with a decision point, a fork in the road, which if taken will change everything that flows from it.

Mark's gospel captures the scene in just eight short verses. There is a sense of urgency here. He has gathered up his disciples, who now are following him. He's been baptized into a new sense of ministry, and this is the launch of it, right here, right now.

The gospel writer saw fit to create a *chiasm* for this passage—an ancient literary tool that creates a pattern.<sup>2</sup> We've formatted it in your service leaflet to see. A chiasm, from the Greek letter Chi, or X, is a crossing, a crossroad, where in this case, the first verse is paired with last verse, the second is matched with the penultimate, and so forth. There is movement here, a sense of immediacy (21 and 28), amazement (22 and 27), crying out (23 and 26), and engagement (24 and 25).

Such chiasms occur in various parts of the Bible, but also in the Iliad and the Odyssey, in Beowulf and Paradise Lost, presumably to aid

the herald telling the story from memory, but scholars note a high literary quality to these as tools to convey layers of meaning for those who would hear them. Chiasms are designed to crack the story open and invite us in—with immediacy, amazement, clamoring and engagement.

But we can also see the chiasm as a crossroad for Jesus here. He is from Nazareth, and nothing good can come from Nazareth, or so we're told. He's a backwater boy, of low means and little education. How can he don his prophetic mantle without authority? And yet here he stands; he can do no other.

Much has been written about the difference between power and authority. One can have power to influence the lives of others to bend to their will, and often finds expression in terms of coercion, by highlighting the consequences they will suffer if they do not comply. Some leaders rule by power, but rarely are recorded in history as good leaders.

Authority, on the other hand, involves a claim of legitimacy that is bestowed upon the leader by others, so that the leader's use of power carries with it a moral authority. Authority elicits response from others in a

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<sup>2</sup> Plural would be chiasmata, but I am using chiasms here for simplicity.

non-coercive way because of the respect and trust the one in authority is given.

History tells us, for example, that Richard Nixon had great power given the office he occupied, but he possessed little legitimate authority to use it in the waning days of his presidency, and his abuse of power led to his downfall.

Abraham Lincoln, on the other hand, had immense authority to lead the country in its darkest hour, and changed the course of the country as a result.

Both men were presented with chiasms, forks in the road, and the choices and consequences that followed shaped their lives and their legacies. I would suggest these decision points were, at their core, grounded in the spiritual work of their care and concern for others, the capacity for compassion and mercy, which we claim, as people of faith, to be attributes of God and values worthy of embrace as we make our way through life.

When Jesus steps into the chiasm of this healing story, he is immediately noted to be one with authority, but when he goes deeper even, when he engages the man possessed by the demon, he uses the power of love, and mercy and compassion, to heal him, knowing

that word would spread and his life would change. In the crux of the moment, in verses 24 and 25, which is a spiritual engagement, he is named by the demon, and exercises his power to heal the man.

It is worth noting that Jesus had no political power, no military force standing behind him, no wealth to his name, no prestige in his society, none of the normal props for the powerful. Throughout the gospels, he resists bending people to his will by coercing them, choosing instead to invite people to follow him, to embrace his proposition of living life another way, to engage people as one having authority, which at its core, is about mercy and compassion and love.

It has been said that Christendom—the Church aligned with political power from the 4<sup>th</sup> Century on—died about fifty years ago, precisely because it accumulated worldly power and used it to bend people to its will. The centuries are strewn with the victims of war waged in God's name.

I, for one, think that it is a good thing that Christendom has died, or is dying, because Christianity can once again approach its chiasms of spiritual work presenting to us, if we will resist the trappings of power that will trip us up still if we choose that path.

The question for us, as the Church, as Christians who claim to follow this Jesus, in this place and time, the question is by what authority do we stand and act in God's name, by what authority do we speak prophetically in the face of corrupting power? If we speak and act untethered by those deep-seated guideposts of mercy and compassion and love, then we will drift and stray, losing our way, leaving the chiasms fractured and in disarray. There will be no authority to our voice.

But if we stay true to those values, we will surely find our way, and we will live into that authority which the world desperately longs to give those who will lead, courageously and

with compassion, drawing inspiration from our common humanity and our loving and merciful creator.

Frost ends his poem with the invitation to parse life by the choices that come our way.

*Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

Looks for the chiasms in your life, and consider what it means to claim authority as one demonstrating compassion and mercy and love, in God's name.



SAINT MARK'S  
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL

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