

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Teachers”

February 1, 2009

Reverend Arthur P. Ritter

Mark 1:21-28

They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 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.’ At once his fame began to

Henry Brooke Adams once said, “A teacher affects eternity, he or she can never tell where his/her influence stops.” Some of you are or have been classroom teachers. I thank you for the important job that you have done and continue to do. Teachers aren’t particularly powerful people, at least not by the standards of the world. Just look at their salaries. Yet really good teachers change lives. They communicate knowledge but also speak from their experience. Good teachers reach into the soul of our life’s struggles and into the heart of our life’s search. Teachers pass on information, tradition, values, and promise.

I recall a couple of my high school teachers who I believe were the perfect examples of good and bad teaching. Mr. Rollin was my sophomore World History teacher. He taught with the excitement of a man describing a snail race. Mr. Rollin taught each class he taught the very same way; he read from the textbook the same stuff that his students were supposed to read the night before. Of course we wise students soon learned never to read what Mr. Rollin assigned to us. We knew he was going to read it to us the next day! Everyone in the school, with the possible exception of the administration, knew that Mr. Rollin was just a basketball coach who had to teach to be able to coach basketball. Instead of bringing history to life, he buried it daily. The only good thing I remember from my World History class is that Barb Scott, a pretty cheerleader, sat directly in front of me.

The next year my American History teacher was Mr. Clark. Mr. Clark loved history and it showed. He dressed up like Benjamin Franklin to discuss the framing of the United States Constitution. He took us outside in early March to reenact the Boston Massacre. I was unlucky enough to be a British soldier that day, the victim of an icy

snowball tossed by a colonial classmate. I also remember on that day, one of the snowballs had a rock inside it, and it broke a window in the algebra classroom. While I took this as a historic action against the evils of math, Mr. Clark was called into the principal's office. We all thought he might be the victim of the massacre. But he managed to keep his job for at least three years. I understood that there was a certain power to his method, a power that transmitted to our learning.

We may think of Jesus in many different roles. Jesus is Lord, Savior, Redeemer, Shepherd, and Healer. The writer of the gospel of Mark is especially fixated on Jesus' role as teacher. Eleven times in Mark's gospel, Jesus is described as a teacher. I read this week where there are sixteen other times in Mark where Jesus' action is portrayed with a Greek action verb which means "to teach." With all of that in mind, it is slightly baffling to discover that although Mark writes of Jesus as a great teacher, he records hardly any of the things that Jesus taught. Matthew and Luke all have major sermons and parables and discourses. Mark calls Jesus a teacher but doesn't speak of any of his lectures. Obviously Mark never had a history class from Mr. Rollin!

William A. Ward has said, "The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." It is quite clear that Mark describes Jesus as a different kind of teacher, a great teacher, one unique from the rest of the faculty who hung around the Temple. The scribes, or the teachers of Jesus' day, were people who taught by the book. They knew the Scriptures backwards and forwards. They memorized every rule and tradition just like some people seem to want to memorize the church by-laws, just in case anybody tried to sneak something past them. These scribes were known for being knowledgeable about the ways of God. But Mark painted a picture of Jesus with even more than knowledge. There was something about Jesus' teaching and Jesus' healing that fit together. Mark called Jesus a teacher not when he stood at the podium lecturing or at the blackboard diagramming a physics equation. He called Jesus a teacher at those moments when Jesus miraculously healed. He not only offered information about God, he displayed an intimate knowledge of God. He not only knew something, he was something. He not only proclaimed something, he brought something into being.

Preaching scholar Thomas Long writes about our stereotypes of teachers. We might imagine a rather plain woman, hair pulled back into a bun, glasses at the end of her nose, apple on her desk. Or we might picture a rather owl-like-looking man in a rumpled tweed jacket, patches on his elbows, face buried in a book. Regardless of the image, Long writes that we have all spent enough time suffering through vocabulary lists, factoring equations, and listening to tedious lectures on the Code of Hammurabi to know that the word "teaching" is seldom dynamic enough, inspired enough, or exciting enough to describe what people saw in Jesus. It wasn't just teaching- it was a new power, a new revelation, a new authority.

One day when Jesus was teaching, a man possessed with a demon came forward. At that time, demons were held responsible for a lot of bad things, including most of the ills that plagued humanity. They were especially thought to be the cause of the things we label as mental disorders. Humans were at the mercy of these demons unless they could somehow find protection from a higher spiritual power. On that day described by Mark, the demons inside this particular man recognized Jesus. More importantly they recognized the power of God within Jesus. Jesus quickly ordered the

demons out of the man and the man was suddenly freed. The people who witnessed this responded with amazement, "What is this? Is this some new kind of teaching? Is this some new authority?" Apparently, at least for many of the spectators, the actual healing wasn't the most important thing that day. The most important thing was the lesson taught by the healing.

This was more than one man being healed. Mark wants us to see Jesus as a teacher, not as a miracle worker. In fact, Jesus tells those he has healed to say nothing about it. He wanted his listeners not to be recipients of wonder, but followers of his teachings, those who would serve others for the greater good. Jesus taught that in such healing, the power of God was on display, a power already at work in the world. God's power was there to liberate people from the so-called absolute powers of the world. God's power was there to release people from old burdens that kept them captive. God's power was there to set people free from fear, from loneliness, from worry, from sadness- all those things that seem to control us. "You are now set free," Jesus taught them. "This is what God has done."

Brian K. Blount writes that Jesus has the rather dubious and shameless honor of preaching about himself. It is a rather simple math lesson for the teacher inside of Jesus. He would preach that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Then he would say that his healings produced evidence of that Kingdom of God. And then he would say finish the equation: The truth of God stands before you. QED! His healings were not for wonder or power, but for authority.

A few years ago, a new football coach came to a school noted for their losing tradition. Things were so bad that they had lost ten games in a row to their chief rival. The first thing the new coach did was to invite all of the players to an evening picnic at his home. He started a small fire, apparently just to roast hot dogs and marshmallows. But then he rolled out a television with a long extension cord and a VCR. He proceeded to show his new players video after video of the last ten year's losses to their rivals. For more than an hour they watched their opponents scoring touchdowns, recovering fumbles, intercepting passes, sacking quarterbacks, and pointing their victorious fingers in the air. The coach did not make one sound until the painful show was over. Then he stood quietly and said, "All this is in the past. It is over. Now we start with something new." And with that he threw every video into the burning fire. Everyone stood and cheered. Later that year, the coach's team beat their rivals 12-0.

Jesus, the teacher, taught with such authority. He taught as if God's day had already arrived. If we are to live as he taught us, we must realize that his teaching represents the start of something new for us, a release from the old things and ways that have held us captive. We must see our relationship with Jesus as the start of a different path and live as if being a person of God means something in our workplaces, our homes, our community, and our church. We must live as if we really believe God loves us, living as if our importance comes from God's acceptance of us not from our desire to impress others with our status, our knowledge or our possessions. We must live as if we really believe that God has made a difference in our lives and can make a difference in the world we build.