

## Words Shape Me

### Mark 1:21-28 (NIV)

<sup>21</sup> They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. <sup>22</sup> The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. <sup>23</sup> Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, <sup>24</sup> "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" <sup>25</sup> "Be quiet!" said Jesus sternly. "Come out of him!" <sup>26</sup> The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. <sup>27</sup> The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." <sup>28</sup> News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee.

Words have power. We know this. It's why we talk. It's why we listen. Words are not just pure information. Words shape us, form us, mold us. It's why we may have taught our kids (or told ourselves) that sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me. We try to teach our kids and ourselves that sometimes we need to step outside of the words because of the power they have over us. We need to judge these words to make sure that the bad words don't shape or mold us.

Even with that, there is still power in words. Once words are spoken, they can't be taken back. They don't just go away. I can't tell you the number of restless nights that I have spent unable to fall asleep because of the words that someone said. Words affect us. Words have authority.

Since words have authority, power to shape us and others, how are our words shaping others? When I talk to people, how do I talk to them? Do I talk to them derisively? Do I put them down? Do I insult them, call them stupid, foolish, naïve? Do I talk about them dismissively, not taking them seriously as if they don't matter? Do I speak to them or about others without the love of God, without compassion?

If you are married, consider this. If you go to your mom or dad when you are having marriage problems, that you talk about your spouse as being unreasonable, uncaring, lying, mean, and you only talk about their shortcomings, failures, and sins, how will your words shape what they think of your spouse? It won't be positive. And that holds true for how I talk about my family, my parents, my siblings, my relatives, my friends, my coworkers, my boss, my fellow students, my teachers, my governor, my president, and the list goes on. Are my words shaping these people to be the villains, to be hated?

Our words also have the authority, the power, to shape us. So, how do you talk about yourself? If your head is saying about you that you're a screw up, that you're worthless, an underachiever, that you can't do anything right, that you're awkward, undesirable, unlovable, you'll believe those words and become them.

The authority of words shaping people is a universal experience. Even Jesus, as both true man and true God, was shaped by words. "They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue..." (verse 21) It's so subtle that maybe words like these run right past us and we don't soak them in. Jesus had a habit, a custom, of always going to the synagogue on Sabbath, or, to say it like we do, he went to church every Sunday. Why? Because there he would hear the Word of God read from scrolls, the Word of God in psalms and songs, the Word of God in prayers. The Word of God shaped him. He wanted that; he invited that.

Jesus then in turn used that same Word of God to shape others. "Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law." (verses 21-22) What was so amazing about his teaching? Well, he taught with authority, not as the teachers of the law. What does that mean? It means that as the teachers of the law, their Bible scholars, sought to apply God's Word to people, none of them could speak their application without having it backed up by at least 2 other rabbis or teachers. They needed the authority of others to give power to their words.

Not Jesus. Maybe you've never thought about this, but Jesus never used the prophetic formula, "Thus says the Lord." No, he spoke by his own authority as God. He didn't have to back up his claims with references to 2 or 3 other rabbis or teachers. He would open the scrolls and declare to them that this is what God says, that God's Word was fulfilled in their hearing right now, words that had the authority and power to shape them without qualifying their source. The proof was in what happened to people.

But I can do that too, can't I? I can just say something and stuff happens, right? I have authority. I say stand, and you stand. I say be seated, and you do it. However, you can also say when I say to stand or sit, "Nope. I'm not doing that. You can't make me do that."

This sitting and standing is stupid. You can't control me." And you're right. I can't. My words have limited authority. You can stand outside my words and judge them, stand outside of their power. My words only do things if you decide to put yourself under the authority of them.

I know this because I've seen people disregard the words that I speak, not just in preaching, but, as it relates to our Gospel reading today, even in demon possession. Here's a weird fact that you may or may not know. In my 15 years of being a pastor, I have been approached by 3 people with claims of demon possession. Two of them I think were genuine; the other seemed more likely to be the onset of dementia. Particularly in the two cases, I prayed for the people that the devil and demons would leave them. Afterwards, one told me that now they knew they could never be a child of God. The other said, "Well, I don't feel any different, but I didn't expect anything to change."

Where the authority of my words failed, Jesus' authority and power of his words were made abundantly clear. In the synagogue that day, Jesus was not offering good advice with his words or a self-help mantra that people could repeat in order to think better, live better, live more godly. No, his words actually did something. A man in their synagogue cried out, disrupting their worship, trying to use his words to exercise power over Jesus, using his name and his title, "the Holy One of God." But Jesus sternly said to him, "Be quiet! Come out of him!" (verse 25) And it did exactly that.

The demon could not stand outside of Jesus' words and judge whether or not they were true, whether or not he would believe them, whether or not he would obey them. Jesus spoke, and the demon had to obey. This is proof that Jesus' Word has authority. His Word made things happen. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other, "What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to impure spirits and they obey him." (verse 27)

That same authoritative Word has been spoken to us and has exercised its power over us. It has changed us, shaped us. Jesus says that I have completed a perfect life for you; you are perfect. This actually makes us perfect. God tells us that we are forgiven and cleansed by the shedding of Jesus' holy blood, and so we are actually forgiven. God says that with water and his Word that he washed you clean and adopted you into his family in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and so we are really children of God and heirs of heaven, citizens of his kingdom. God says that I want you to be with me, and so we are desired. God says I give everything for you, and so we are valued. With words God does all these things for us to shape us and make us whole and complete, without lacking anything.

This is why we come and gather for worship week after week, why we read God's Word, listen to sermons and devotions. We don't come here to find someone with an agenda that we agree with or to get some self-help resources. We come here because God's words have authority. We know this because his Word actually changed us, caused us to believe it and have all that he says.

Now, if you want to step outside of these words and judge them, you can. You can tell God that I reject your authority, that I'm not going to listen to you, just like how you said the mantra, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" so that you could mitigate or negate the power of the words spoken to you. The love of God doesn't force you, like that demon, to believe what he has done for you. He doesn't force you to follow him and enjoy all these blessings.

But what God says is true. His words have powerful authority even when we don't want to believe them, even when we don't like them. We try to stand in judgment of God and his Word because we think we know better. The truth is that we are so often unsure. People lie all the time. Even within ourselves we know that our thinking can be warped and our feelings impure. We know that we can be wrong. Not God. God doesn't lie. He has done great things for you and has given us words to tell that story, authoritative words that change us and shape us. If we reject his words, we will still have to face his words in the future. His word of judgment will stand, regardless of whether or not we want them to, just as happened with the demon in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Words have authority over us. Because of this, we need true words, words outside of our own heads to shape us, form us. We need the authoritative Word of God to tell us who we really are. Yes, we are sinners, but that's not all the Word says. With words, God tells us that we are loved, forgiven, cleansed. His words make us his children, heirs of heaven, citizens of his kingdom. Speak, O Lord, and change us by thy strong Word. Amen.