**“They spoke as ones having authority”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, Massachusetts

For the 4th Sunday after Epiphany

January 28, 2018

Because of our family schedules, I’m often the parent who picks up the boys from their after school care and shuttles them to piano or karate or whatever. So I spend much of the late afternoon driving around Bedford in a well-choreographed route from point a to b to c to d to home. Generally the Daddy Taxi radio is set to NPR, so this route is accompanied by dulcet tones of afternoon newscasts. Some of the legs in this route, I’m the car alone; and sometimes I have one or more kids with me, so I’ve gotten pretty good at adjusting the volume level in each leg, based on who is the car. There are some things even a 7 year old isn’t ready to hear yet…and lately, lots of those things are on NPR.

But this week took the cake. By Wednesday the volume was all the way off even when I was driving alone. Because I just couldn’t listen any more to the hours and hours of testimony from that courtroom in Michigan of the brave young women and their parents about the years of abuse they suffered at the hands of their athletic trainer. It’s just horrific on every level: the criminal pathology of the assailant, the persistence of the abuse over decades, the hesitancy of various institutions to investigate, and the reluctance of supervisors to act to protect young people. It is unthinkable; except of course that it’s a chain of events that we’ve seen before in several other kinds of institutional contexts, in schools, in health care, even in churches.

As much as I wanted to turn away from the whole mess, to avoid the depths of the sadness and anger in this chaos, I couldn’t do it. The voices of the survivors, each one unique and different, nevertheless all spoke with an undercurrent of such power and moral clarity that they compelled my attention. Their strength to stand up and say what happened to them, to push through whatever feelings of shame may be lurking within, to speak of their pain and their resilience out in the open, to model for other survivors of sexual abuse that a future of healing and self-love is possible…that’s a kind of courage to which I can only aspire. So I turned the radio back on, and allowed my despair at the crimes they endured to be companioned by my respect for their testimony and a renewal of my commitment to do whatever I can do in my life to be an agent of change.

In today’s Gospel, Mark writes that when Jesus first began to teach in the synagogue the people, “were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.” The Greek word for authority used here is exousia. Ex meaning from or out of; ousia meaning being or self or essence. Exousia means from our very essence; out of our very being. Mark is comparing Jesus’ teaching which comes out of his own essence or being, to the scribes’ teaching, which comes from the explication of the Mosaic law. Unlike the theoretical reasoning of the scribes, which Mark finds lacking, Mark describes Jesus’ kind of teaching as having exousia – having authority. It is Jesus’ willingness to speak with this real authority from the depths of his being, to testify to what he knows to be his essential truth, that proves deeply compelling to everyone who hears it.

And all week as I prepared to preach on this lesson, I couldn’t help but think of these women athletes and their parents testifying to the truth of their experience in court. They spoke with voices, at times fragile at others defiant, but always as ones having authority. As ones revealing the truth of something that had been hidden or forgotten or denied or suppressed for too long. And this is exactly what Jesus did when he began his ministry of teaching and speaking in public: sharing the essential truth of God’s compassion and love for all people, in a time when those who should have been paying the most attention to that truth had hidden it, or forgotten it, or denied it, or suppressed it for their own selfish reasons. Those who spoke in that courtroom were speaking from the same depths of truth as Jesus spoke. It may have been the judge’s words, as she sentenced the defendant, that had the most power in that courtroom, but it was the words of those survivors that carried the most authority – that sounded the most like Jesus.

And it is my hope and prayer that the moral authority of the survivors’ teachings will have a similar impact on those who hear them as Jesus’ words did. Returning again to Mark’s Gospel, he writes that the crowd in the synagogue, is “astounded” by Jesus’ words. They are attracted to them like a moth to a flame. They want more and they don’t even necessarily know why. It’s just an instinct. But unlike a moth, it isn’t a physical instinct, it’s a moral instinct. You and I have felt such moral attraction before. Maybe even with Jesus. But certainly with some other kind of teacher to you, someone who you just knew was speaking with authority, from the truth of their being in a way that compelled your attention. In a way that made you want to follow them however you could. To take the every course they offered in the catalogue. To angle your way onto every project team with them that you could. To buy every single one of their CDs or records and play them as loud as your parents or your spouse would tolerate. We know moral authority when we hear it.

But there can be a danger in our almost magnetic attraction to truth tellers, too. And we see hints of it in Mark’s Gospel. Again, the Greek is much more descriptive. The word for ‘astounded’ is expplesso, which can also be translated as ‘struck with panic’. I appreciate this overtone, because it rings as something of a warning. When I hear anyone speaking from the deep truth of their own experience, with a power and moral authority that resonates within me, I am filled both with awe and, perhaps also, with a bit of fear. Because when deep truth is both spoken and recognized as such, it compels change. It reveals that the reconciled future God longs for must be somehow different than the brokenness of the present described in such compelling speech. The demons in the Gospel recognize this right away. They acknowledge the authority with which Jesus speaks by calling him the Holy One of God, recognizing that his words have power. They know the days in which they can possess others and use them for destructive purposes are numbered. And ultimately, they are compelled by the authority with which Jesus speaks, to flee away, even as the crowds seem content to stand amazed.

There is a challenge here in Mark’s telling of this story, about whether those who follow Jesus will become as responsive to the authority of his teaching as the mystical demonic forces that oppose him. We know from this early story that Jesus’ disciples are just as *attracted* to him as the demons; the question is, will they be as *responsive* to him? Will they be transformed by this teaching that astounds them?

There is a similar challenge to us and our society in the stories told by the brave survivors in that Michigan courtroom. The challenge is whether we will be not just morally attracted to their courageous testimony, but morally responsive to it. Will we examine our personal behaviors and actions to ensure that we are signaling to victims who are not yet survivors that sexual abuse is something about which we are ready to listen? Will we educate and prepare ourselves around what to do if a friend or a child or a parent or a co-worker tells us they or others are being victimized? Will we create a culture in which reports of suspected abuse cause us not to be struck with panic or fear, but to be committed to effective responsiveness? Will we reflect on how the systems in which we live and work and play and pray, can reduce the likelihood that abuse of any kind occurs and increase the likelihood that if it does happen it will be reported, investigated, and acted upon with thought, care and compassion?

These may sound like easy questions to say yes to, but they are not as easy to operationalize. I’m proud that your vestry recently took at least one step forward in our revision of the parish’s Safe Church Guidelines, which are now posted in full in the Parish Hall. They are an important affirmation that our congregation actively works to prevent abuse of all kinds and stands ready to hear the stories, provide support, and affirm the humanity of anyone who finds themselves in an abusive situation: as a victim, a witness, or a perpetrator.

As Christians, we are reminded to listen attentively for ones around us who speak with authority, for they speak the words of Christ to us today. Their voices are not always loud or confident; and their stories often unfamiliar. Their words and their teachings may leave us astounded or struck with panic. But God has given to all human beings an inherent attraction those who speak with a true moral authority. Our work as friends of Jesus is to give thanks for that instinctive attraction to truth, to amplify those voices when they speak softly or are drowned out by the noise around us, and to trust that they are leading us into holy transformations in which whatever we fear may be lost is counted as gain for Christ’s sake. Amen.