

January 31, 2021 - The fourth Sunday in ordinary time

First Reading: Deuteronomy 18.15-20

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 7.32-35

Gospel: Mark 1.21-28

For this reflection, I would like to focus on three aspects of the Gospel reading which is also connected to our first reading from Deuteronomy.

- The first is a reflection on what is meant when the Gospel says that Jesus speaks with authority.
- The second is what is being suggested by comparing the impact of Jesus's words to those of the Scribes.
- And the third part of my reflection is focused on the calling out of unclean spirits; how can we understand this in today's reality.

Jesus speaks with Authority

Have you ever listened to someone and knew in your heart that they were speaking with "authority", when you had a deep sense that they were telling you something true? I have had this experience a number of times in my life while listening to another who reveals a truth that resonates so deeply within me.

A person that comes to mind immediately is Henri Nouwen. In his writings and also when listening to him speak, he spoke of a fundamental insight about truth that he had discovered, in his earlier years as a theologian, he thought that once he had discovered a truth, he could announce it and people would just be in agreement. Henri discovered quite the opposite; that when he spoke this truth, many would agree with him while others would argue and have opposing views. Truth, being an authority, Henri learned was quite elusive.

In his journey, particularly in his time in L'Arche, he learned that truth is discovered when we first find the courage to be in relationship with one another. The fundamental truth he discovered announced in relationship and the message in much of his writing was that each person is the "beloved" of God. The reason that I use the word courage is that he chose to be in relationship first and then announce this "truth"; he had to first acknowledge his own belovedness and then see that he was called to be with others, not just to speak this truth but also support others in accepting this truth.

Henri could give spiritual guidance to those seeking his help, (and there were literally thousands who sought his guidance) because he was so acutely aware of his own brokenness and the demons he struggled with. This is the authority that resonated with others. He was speaking on behalf of something deeper, his relationship with God. In his words he was a "wounded healer". Nouwen used this term to describe those who sought to help others while acknowledging their own woundedness. This is where authority and authenticity are so deeply connected. He could fully embrace himself, as he was fully loved and then speak from this truth, calling others to find the courage to accept this gift of God's love.

I would like to suggest that the same occurred with Jesus when he spoke in the synagogue; he spoke 'truth' with authority being grounded in his relationship with God. He called others to live out of that reality as well. The people in the synagogue had heard many people speak; so what was it that was so striking when Jesus spoke? The Scribes quoted the Tanach and spent years trying to understand the laws of God and how others should live to be righteous in the eyes of God; in other words, to be righteous one had to act, believe and behave in a certain way. When this is the standard, it is easy to understand why authenticity becomes important, do you live what you say? Telling others how to live could ring hollow if it is not anchored in practice.

Jesus, rather than telling others how to live, called those around him to discover this fundamental truth about God's love. God's laws were not meant to overpower and dominate, but rather to acknowledge our fundamental relationship with God. For Jesus not only spoke with authority but was authentic; grounded in the knowledge of being a beloved of God, he could speak about his intimate relationship with God illustrating how to speak authoritatively about the true nature of salvation.

The impact of Jesus's words to those of the Scribes.

Jesus' teaching is contrasted in the Gospel to the Scribes for the Scribes had extensive knowledge of the law, acting in many ways as lawyers of the law. They knew the law, however the deeper meaning and purpose of the law escaped them. This I believe is the danger we face today, as there are numerous people that we could call Scribes; those who are able to quote the bible extensively and yet, it is easy to get a sense that they want to tell others how to live and often

speak of God's love being conditional. Speaking this way about "truth" can easily lead others to be confused and uncertain about God.

Jesus spoke with authority because he knew God and spoke out of this truth. He often challenged those around him, particularly those in positions of authority, to see the true purpose and nature of God and his laws. He spoke with authority, recognizing and calling those around him, particularly the needy, to enter into their heart and recognize their true value; to come to a fuller knowledge of their relationship with God. He invited those around him to discover their "authority", in the acceptance of themselves and their relationship with God. He called others to be authentic.

We too can speak with authority when we are speaking of what we have lived, embracing our story and the truth of our story. We can become more authentic when we speak of our story and recognize that we too like Henri Nouwen are called to be wounded healers. We accept our own brokenness and vulnerability and our desire to be in relationship with God and in that grounding to be in relationship with others, allowing them to discover their own authenticity.

The calling out of unclean spirits; how can we understand this in today's reality

In this last part of my reflection, I would like to reflect on what Jesus calling out to the unclean spirit means to me today. I would like to link the term "unclean spirit" by continuing to build on what it means to be authentic and speak with authority.

I look at my own internal struggles, what I can call internal demons, be it thoughts or doubts or patterns of behavior that have emerged coming from a struggling family. As I am getting older, I recognize how blessed I have been sharing my life with others, many with a developmental disability, and how this has helped me to embrace and become who I am. Over the years, I have learned to slowly let go of what others expect or demand from me. I have learned also not to fear my heart but to embrace it. I find it much easier today to be confronted with my weaknesses or failures and not become defensive or try to justify, but rather to accept who I am.

Each one of us I believe struggles with this, and while we may have a desire to be authentic, we may be afraid of what it means. I have learned that when I speak of

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my 'truth' my own lived experience in its fullness, how liberating this can be. It took Jesus many years to call out my 'unclean spirits'; it wasn't in a simple exchange as in the Gospel reading, yet the impact has been the same. I have more fully embraced who I am. As I age, I can see that my call now is to call others to 'liberate' themselves and discover their authentic voice, embracing their own story, to live out of a deep relationship with God and radiate this truth to others with authority.

I also see that as a community, it is easy to cast out those who are "different". In the time of Jesus, I can only imagine the labels, the categories individuals or groups who were different were put in. Perhaps Jesus was also calling out the unclean spirit as a communal act to invite those in the synagogue to let go of their labels and fears and the man as he truly was. Perhaps he was giving permission to allow the person with the 'unclean spirit' to cast out this label put on him by others and embrace himself as a Beloved of God.

Perhaps Jesus was not only addressing the person with an unclean spirit and demonstrating the power of God's love; he may have been calling the whole community to see people as they truly are; letting go of labels, categories and prejudices that do not allow others to embrace themselves.

In prayer,

Raphael Amato