

*Paying Attention* – Judy Cox

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Twenty years ago I was schooled by a poet—awakened, by someone whose life focus is the crafting of words, to the deep meaning that can hide beneath the surface of our language. Luci Shaw offered a seminar in journaling through the church which she and we as well were newly attending. I confess I'm still a self-conscious failure when it comes to journaling, in spite of her teaching. But I began to learn the “noticing” necessary to self-awareness; I carry with me yet her insight into a cliché I had casually and even glibly employed. “Attention,” she observed forcefully, “is something we PAY.”

Our Deuteronomy text today recounts Israel's fearful plea for respite from the immanent, overpowering presence of God at Horeb. God accommodates their weakness with the promise of an authorized intermediary, a prophetic voice from amongst the people themselves who would speak God's words in God's name, following in Moses' footsteps. Repeatedly we are told that Israel is to *heed such a prophet...heed the words that the prophet shall speak in God's name*. Israel must heed the one(s) whom God authorizes to fulfill this prophetic office. This verb *heed* (or *shema'*) famously appears earlier in Deuteronomy, in the *Shema'* of chapter 6: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!*—or as the NRSV translates, *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone*. (You may have noticed that it is quoted in our epistle text today as well!) The NRSV's rendering as *Heed* in today's Deuteronomy passage arguably might carry the sense more adequately than our English word *Hear*. This verb implies much more than listening alone; it also entails responding—you guessed it, paying attention! Attention is something God's people must pay; it is costly.

We Christians understand Jesus as ultimately and most adequately fulfilling that God-authorized prophetic role, speaking God's words, fully representing and revealing God as only God's Son can do. This gospel of Mark got us in on the ground floor with verse one, describing Jesus in just that way: *Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. It shows us God's Spirit, *descending like a dove on him*. Today's gospel passage, from that same first chapter, shows him living out that ultimate authorization—exercising, and meanwhile demonstrating, that authority. To employ the words of the psalmist, he is *gaining renown by his wonderful deeds*. Our text also shows his audience “hearing him” in various ways.

The fishermen have truly “heeded” Jesus' call, paying costly attention; as Dr. Smerick reminded us last week, in laying aside nets and boats, parents and servants, they lay aside ‘the roles and identity markers of their former lives’ to follow him. They follow Jesus into Capernaum, and there, *immediately, on the Sabbath* he goes into the synagogue, the village assembly for study of Scripture and prayer. He begins to teach, and astonishes the assembly at his *teaching with authority*—Dr. Brittingham might call it his ‘gravitas.’ Unlike the literate religious elites, the scribes, Jesus does not cite experts, evaluating and comparing their thoughts. No bibliography of the rabbis, in MLA format, is handed out. Instead of referencing others' commentary on a text, Jesus speaks *as one having authority*. He speaks as one with God-given authority, decisively, with power and agency. Mark does not repeat the content of his teaching here, but we know it from verse 15: *God's Kingdom has come near, repent/make a change, and trust this good news!* We too can recognize the prophetic resonance, similar to other Scriptures' familiar, “Thus saith the Lord!”

But wait, there's more! It's not just in his teaching that Jesus' authority is displayed! We are told that immediately, urgently there is a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue. Urgent?—this would be an outright emergency. No one with that condition, whatever we understand the text to mean, would be allowed in the synagogue! Whether spiritually, physically or emotionally afflicted, anyone with this “uncleanness” would have been excluded from the assembly. So does he burst his way in, or does his condition just then manifest itself for the first time? Mark doesn't stop the story to explain. This afflicted man, disrupting by his words as well as his presence, cries out, *What to us and to you, Jesus the Nazarene? What have you to do with us? This is direct conflict, challenging him. Have you come to utterly destroy us? I know who YOU are, God's set-apart, dedicated, Holy One!*

Does Jesus' presence and teaching “out” this from hiding? Does he (or they) think to “out” Jesus, in turn? It sounds like a snarling dog, cornered and vicious. Jesus effortlessly exercises control, scolding him, much like we might a stray dog. “Be muzzled!” (For you fans of the show “Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan,” this is a REALLY effective “Tssst!”) And then Jesus says, simply, *Get out of him! Shoo! And the unclean spirit convulsing him, and crying out with a loud voice, went out of him.*

Frustratingly, we aren't told what happens next with that man! Apparently that's not the point of this gospel passage. Our writer shifts perspective “immediately” to the onlookers' response (and we don't hear a word about them celebrating this man's deliverance!). No, instead: they are amazed, they marvel or wonder, debating amongst themselves. *What is this? A new teaching, with authority! He commands, (or enjoins) the unclean spirits* (literally, ‘he sets over’ them). *And they obey him* (literally, ‘they hear under’ him, under his authority.) That hierarchy of authority is clearly emphasized.

While exorcisms would not have been unfamiliar, the simplicity of Jesus' speech would have been so, radically! You may remember the story from the book of Acts of the 7 sons of Sceva. They tried without faith, or success (!), to perform exorcisms mechanistically, with a formula, *in the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches*. That was the Jewish exorcists' formula, calling on the name of God—but notice what Jesus has said! As with his teaching, he has not cited another's authority or expertise, even God's. He has simply said, “Shut up and get out”—and it was so! The listeners, already astonished by Jesus' independent, nonreferential teaching style, are even more amazed.

Notice, however, that amazement only takes you so far. These listeners are NOT re-orienting their lives, accepting Jesus' authority, and trusting the good news he proclaims! Mark contrasts this response of amazement and astonishment as superficial, falling short of the disciples' response of making a change—repenting—and believing. Rather than following Jesus, the crowd turns to debating amongst themselves. Cautiously reasoning, warily deliberating, engaging intellectually, but not with their lives, they like the Corinthians might well deserve Paul's rebuke, “Knowledge puffs up!” Giving attention, maybe, but not “paying” it—hearing, if you will, but not heeding.

Our last verse emphasizes the ambiguity of their response with further ambiguity. English translation here obscures the implication of the Markan vocabulary. Literally, the *hearing* about him *gets out* (like the unclean spirit!), into all of Galilee, *immediately*. So what might THAT imply?! We are left hanging, wondering if this hearing will resemble the unclean spirit's, a ‘hearing under his authority’ that equates to obedience—if only the forced obedience of the

spirit's departure. Might some of the Galileans, like the fishermen, leave their current situations and radically reorient their lives towards Jesus? Will they 'hear under his authority'—that is, obey? Or will they join the townsfolk in disputation and quibbling, delaying any decisive response? Will they heed, and respond in obedience, or stop short with merely listening?

And guess what, folks?—WE, just by virtue of being in this room, hearing this text read today, join that crowd of listeners! No way to wriggle out of it!

What kind of listeners are we? If we're "heeding," how might we be called to pay radical, costly attention? What kind of changes are we called to make as we accept his authority and respond in obedience? What roles, identity markers, attitudes are we called to lay aside as we repent and trust? Here our Epistle passage joins the discussion, giving us at least one uncomfortable suggestion.

The Corinthian church, wrestling with whether or not the eating of food offered to idols has any spiritual impact, might seem far removed from our "enlightened" situation in 2014. But the deeper issue, of how a community functions in love, surely pertains. Are we American individualists really able to function as the Body of Christ? Will we modify our behavior, just in case our "liberty" endangers our sisters and brothers? Do we see this endangering as a sin against Christ? We Americans are not exactly noted for limiting the exercising of our own rights for the sake of others. Now I could bring up slavery-free but expensive chocolate...or gun control...or social drinking...and the hair on your necks would surely be bristling at one, if not all... Would I have left off preaching, and gone to meddling? Or might I be calling us—calling me!—to PAY attention? For each of us, THAT would be costly change—to repent and lay aside the identity marker of American individualist, to limit our rights for the sake of another!

Scripture skewers us, over and over. What kind of listeners are we? What IS our response to Jesus' authority? Are we open to letting the gospel enter and interpret our lives? More than that, are we so attentive to the story of Jesus that we become a part of it? We too are invited to heed and respond rather than merely listen—to repent-and-trust-this-Good-News. When Jesus, whom we name Prophet as well as Priest and King, speaks, how willing are we to PAY attention?