

**Haydenville Congregational Church**  
**The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian**  
**February 1, 2009**  
**Mark1:21-28**

**“...he taught them as one having authority...”**

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts  
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

While watching CNN last Monday evening, I was surprised to find Anderson Cooper interviewing Ted Haggard. You remember Ted Haggard—founder and former pastor of the wildly successful megachurch called the New Life Church in Colorado Springs. Pastor Ted, as he was known, was also the leader of the National Association of Evangelicals which boasts 30 million members. Ted Haggard lost both of those prestigious positions in 2006 when a male escort came forward claiming that he had known the minister for three years as “Art,” and “Art” was a drug-using, sex-for-cash client. When the male escort’s accusations proved to be true, Ted Haggard went into exile.

Apparently a new film has just been released that documents Haggard’s life since his fall from grace. And so this past week Ted Haggard was making the rounds of the TV talk shows to tell his side of the story. I saw him on CNN, apparently he was on the Early Show mid-week, and I saw him again Thursday night on Larry King Live.

Both times this week when I saw Ted Haggard interviewed on TV—first by Anderson Cooper and then by Larry King—the hosts cut away from the interview to show clips of Pastor Ted years ago preaching at the New Life Church in Colorado, a church with 14,000 members. The footage of him leading worship and preaching was powerful—there was Pastor Ted on a big stage with a huge robed choir behind him. There was Pastor Ted strutting and stomping, gesturing forcefully, raising his voice then whispering dramatically.

He was very impressive—powerful and impressive. The thousands of people in his congregation and the millions who saw him on TV might have stopped and said, “he speaks with authority.” One certainly could have said “Pastor Ted speaks with authority.”

**Pastor Ted DID appear to speak with authority. But he did not live with integrity. And so eventually his words rang hollow as the truth of his life emerged.**

And so today, my questions for you, for us are:  
What does it mean, in religious circles, for someone to speak with authority?  
And who can speak with authority?

Is this something we understand, something we strive for, something that even matters?

In today's Gospel lesson, Mark tells us that Jesus and his followers went to Capernaum and "*when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching,*" the Bible says, "*for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*"

Jesus taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes. Now that is strange. Jesus actually had no authority and the scribes did have authority. Jesus, with no real authority or stature, is contrasted with the scribes who had real authority and considerable stature. Jesus supersedes the superstars! But why and how? And what authority did the scribes have anyway?

The word "scribe" comes from the Latin word meaning "writer." The scribes in ancient society were a learned class of men who were well versed in Israelite Law. Sometimes referred to as high priests and elders, the scribes were charged with passing on their knowledge of the Law, and interpreting Scripture. The scribes were active and visible in the temple, their fine robes meant to identify them as pious leaders in the community.

In contrast, Jesus was a poor, plain-clothed, itinerant, wandering preacher with no title, no credentials and a scraggly band of believers. Jesus only preached in an actual synagogue a handful of times choosing instead hillsides, shorelines and plains to deliver his message. He did not come from a famous family and had none of the trappings of success—wealth, servants, a fancy home. Jesus was a nobody. A nobody who spoke with authority.

The Gospel of Mark is frustrating for us today because Mark tells us repeatedly that Jesus spoke with authority—today's reading is one of many passages when Jesus as teacher and preacher causes "astonishment" in those who hear him—but Mark fails to tell us, over and over again, WHAT Jesus said in those settings.

The reason is that Mark is less interested in WHAT Jesus said than in WHO Jesus was. What Mark is trying to tell us is that the actual content of what Jesus said was less significant than how Jesus lived—Mark believed that it was who Jesus was and how he witnessed with his life that caused those around him to be astonished. Mark’ message is: when Jesus spoke people listened to him, believed him, and followed him...AS OPPOSED to the scribes—the designated big deals—who spoke but lacked a sense of authority.

The contrast is stark: Jesus should have been dismissed, he should have been overlooked, he should have been disregarded, or considered a kook. And yet this uncredentialed, seemingly unimpressive, wandering prophet-preacher left crowd after crowd feeling, with astonishment, that he “spoke with authority.”

So what did Jesus have or do that made his words, his message overcome his humble circumstances?

I think Jesus’ authority came from two sources:

One...Jesus was filled with the Spirit of God. He was authentically filled with the Spirit of God. In this church we often talk about the God-sized hole within each one of us that longs to be filled with God-like things. Well, Jesus was filled with God-like things...deep communion with God, endless hours of prayer and meditation, a wellspring of compassion, a love for justice, a yearning for peace. Jesus was filled with the Spirit of God. And so when he spoke he tapped into that deep goodness within him, he radiated those values, he reflected God, and that moved people.

Second...I believe Jesus’ authority came from the fact that he lived with integrity. He lived what he spoke about.

His beliefs and his behaviors were congruent and that astounded people.

Jesus spoke about the meek inheriting the earth and he called the meek to be his disciples, and he dined with the meek and he visited the meek and he touched and healed the meek.

Jesus preached the good news—which is code for the fact that CHANGE IS COMING—he confronted the empire, the powerful system and leaders of this time. He spoke of justice in a profoundly unjust society, he empowered the disempowered, he modeled a different understanding of prince and king....as the prince of peace and the mocked king of the Jews.

To use a Quaker expression, Jesus spoke truth to power, and he did so in a time when it was unimaginable that truth and power could co-exist.

Jesus lived what he preached, his words rang true, that gave him authority. And those who heard him were astounded.

And so where does this leave us today?

How are we to make sense of speaking with authority today and who gets to do speak with authority?

These are important questions because WE ARE—each one of us—called to speak with authority. We are called to continue the work that Jesus began. Jesus left work for us to take up, we are called to carry on what he started.

And that involves speaking with authority. Can we do that?

Yes I believe we can. One lesson we glean from the Biblical story today is that impressive credentials, outward trappings of success, fancy degrees and a long resume are not the requirements for speaking with authority about our faith and our God. There ARE requirements for speaking with authority but the requirements do not include titles, diplomas, robes or celebrity status.

Modeling our lives after Jesus' life we realize that we can speak with authority if we are:

#1 filled with the Spirit;

#2 living what we profess.

We can speak with authority if we are filling that God-sized hole inside us with God-like things....prayer and meditation, conversation with God, service to others, and the study of the Scripture.

AND we can speak with authority if our personal choices, our boring day to day decisions, our very lifestyle, our individual witness are consistent with the Christian values we hold dear....

We can speak with authority if we are filled with the Spirit and living what we profess.

So you who have no advanced degrees, you who finished high school but never went on to college much less to some elite seminary....you are called to speak with authority.

You who feel unimportant, insignificant, you who never made a big name for yourself by society's standards....you are called to speak with authority.

You who hold a deep and abiding faith, you who know God well but stumble when you try to explain how God's presence informs and influences your whole life....you are called to speak with authority.

You who cannot quote the Bible chapter and verse but know it is a book that draws us closer to God and raises essential questions that we must struggle with during our lifetimes....you are called to speak with authority.

You can speak with authority IF you are filled with the Spirit of God, and you are living what you profess.

If, like Ted Haggard, you are preaching an anti-gay sermon on Sunday and secretly meeting a male escort on Tuesday, you need to be filled with the Spirit of God and live what you profess to truly speak with authority.

If, like the scribes in ancient times, you can interpret the Scripture with a brilliant analysis but then you use your power and stature to stifle other voices, you need to be filled with the Spirit of God and live what you profess to truly speak with authority.

If you are filled with the Spirit and living what you profess, God will put God's words on your mouth and you will find, to your astonishment, that you can speak with authority. Moses who stuttered said you cannot mean me when God called him....you must mean Aaron my brother. He speaks well, you must mean Aaron. I will put my words on your mouth God told Moses. And yes, I mean YOU.

And God means you, and you, and you and you.  
YOU can speak with authority about your faith and your God and your understanding of Christian values and your beliefs  
IF, and these are requirements are both tough and simple,  
IF you are filled with the Spirit and you live what you profess.

When those are in alignment—you are filled with the Spirit and you live what you profess—then open your mouth and speak about your faith and your God.  
What you say may astonish those who listen.  
But what you say will not astonish God...because God equipped you, prepared you, filled you and called you to speak with authority.  
Amen.