

"When He Speaks, They Listen"

Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Mark 1:21-28

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 18, 2018 – 5th Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Some years back a brokerage firm had a highly successful series of TV ads. In each scenario there was a crowd of loud and noisy people, but then one person would lean over to tell something intentional to another. Immediately the whole room came to a hush and a caption appeared on the screen, "When Paine Weber speaks, everyone listens."

Well, isn't that the same impression we have about Jesus? In today's scripture it ends by saying: The people who heard Jesus were amazed at the way that he taught, for he wasn't like the scribes; instead, he taught with authority." If this were on television, the tag line here might be, "When Jesus speaks, everyone listens."

People frequently stood up in the synagogue to interpret scripture. There was nothing unusual in this. What sets Jesus apart from the rest, however, is that he is seen as speaking with authority.

Words are cheap. Many competing voices today claim to be authoritative, and on almost every issue and topic. Experience has shown us, however, that not all speak with truth and accuracy. Every politician can't be right on every matter. Every scientist can't bring the last word on a subject. Every advertiser can't be counted on to present the best product.

In fact, the greater the claim that is put forward, the more likely we are to be skeptical. We know we can't believe everything we hear. Too many speakers get up only to promote themselves or a favorite cause. Truth can be easily bent to whatever bias they have, and while they may sound convincing, there may be ultimately no power behind their words. In the end they may have nothing important to give us.

The Gospel of Mark makes it plain that the authority of Jesus is different. There was a power and presence that put him into a class all by himself. There was something so special about Jesus that people readily concluded that here was no ordinary man. Here was a person set apart. His words inspired people as no other's did. Jesus not only spoke with authority; he claimed the authority that was given to him.

Our Old Testament lesson for this morning tells of one who likewise put forth such a claim. "Then Moses said, 'In the land you are about to occupy, people follow the advice of those who practice divination and look for omens, but the Lord your God will not allow you to do this. Instead he will send you a prophet like me, from among your own people, and you are to obey him.'"

Moses' assertion here is not a personal one, but it comes from being chosen and called. He must first listen for the Lord and then he can speak. Only when God's favor is upon him does he speak with authority. Power does not start with him, but is delegated from God. For whatever reason the Lord selected this man to be a channel through which the unknown was

to be made known. The people acknowledged his leadership and usually—though not always—when Moses spoke, people listened.

While true “messengers of God” may appear only infrequently, we do recognize the qualities of authority in some people around us. I had teachers in school that I would describe that way, and they made a lasting impact on me. Some of what I am today has certainly been shaped in part by them. And I was also influenced by certain ministers and neighbors and public figures; and of course, by my own parents.

In fact, most of us are shaped by certain special individuals we are fortunate enough to meet. While the vast number of people who pass through our lives make no great imprint upon us, a few persons we meet bring out the best that is within us. They teach us what is important and encourage us to build upon our potential. They call out the potential given us and we gladly give ear to what they say.

Sometimes that authority in others just stabilizes us and gives us confidence at a crucial moment. One magazine editor wrote of a flight he took once from New York to Miami. The weather was bad when he got aboard at LaGuardia and it didn't improve enroute. When the plane took off it was enveloped in a dense fog. The passengers couldn't even see the wingtips as they looked out the windows. On top of that there was a great deal of turbulence once airborne. If you were inclined to become airsick, this certainly wasn't the flight for you.

The editor said that everyone seated around him seemed nervous and on edge, that is until a confident voice came over the loudspeaker. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. This is your captain. We are now over Wilmington, North Carolina and flying at 11,000 feet. We'll be in Miami on schedule at 2:55 pm. The sun is shining there, the temperature is 82°, and you'll be enjoying it soon.”

After that everyone seemed to visibly relax. He wrote, “We still couldn't see anything out the windows, but we had renewed confidence. The man who was running things in that aircraft knew right where we were, where we were going, when we would get there, and exactly what the conditions would be upon arrival. A voice of authority came to us just when we needed it the most.”

We hear that same kind of confident voice on the tapes of USAirways flight 1549 back in 2009 as Captain Chesley Sullenberger took his giant aircraft and put it down into the tiniest sliver of space available in Manhattan. This veteran pilot made it possible for all to survive what could have been total tragedy. His calm and professional manner in the face of crisis allowed both passengers and crew to prepare themselves for ditching in the Hudson River. Clearly, he was the one in charge and on that day assumed fully the authority placed in him.

I remember the first day I taught high school. I was pretty shaky. I began to wonder why I had chosen such a career. I recall that I got my lunch tray in the cafeteria and brought it over to the teachers' table. One of the seasoned veterans looked across at me and said, “Don't worry, we all felt that way our opening day of classes. You'll survive like the rest of us and look back to laugh at it later.”

And you know, that afternoon did go a lot better than the morning, primarily because I listened to someone who had walked my path before and who could speak with authority to

my insecurity. Perhaps, you've found yourself in a similar situation and been helped out by one you had the good sense to listen to.

Think back on your life. Who was instrumental for you at the very time you needed it the most? Try to remember for a few moments and see if someone comes to mind. Who has strengthened and shaped you and made a real difference for you?

Run your thoughts back over the years and see who might emerge. I'll give you just a little time because I think it's important to get in touch with our past influences.... I hope you thought of someone but, if not in this brief time think about it later today. I believe it will prove to be worthwhile.

One of our biggest challenges in life is who to listen to and who to trust. Just ask all the people who put their confidence and their money in Bernie Madoff's investment schemes. There's a problem in being excessively confident in too many people or, conversely, being overly cynical and trusting too few.

In a world of proliferating authorities, competing claims, there is a voice however which is forever true and which will not let us down. I won't surprise you now when I say Jesus is that one and by him all other claims are measured. If you recognize this ultimate authority in life, perhaps you'll also be better able to discern who is worth listening to today. I've found that often those who claim the top spots may well be the very persons of whom we should be the most cautious.

We need people to look to in life, but real authority is bestowed and not self-proclaimed, earned and not asserted. Jesus knew that, and we would be wise to recognize that, as well. And when we have found those persons of rightful influence, we need to listen and respond accordingly.