

In just the first twenty verses of Mark, so much has happened. John the Baptist came from the wilderness preaching repentance, and Jesus arrived at the Jordan to be baptized by him. The Spirit drove Jesus into the desert for forty days where he was tempted. John was arrested and Jesus came into Galilee preaching. Along the way, he picked up disciples who left their nets and followed him.

The cast in these twenty verses includes John, Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit, the devil, wild beasts, angels, Simon, Andrew, James, John, and all the people of Judea and Jerusalem.

Twenty verses. It is a busy gospel.

Mark is the “Just the facts, Ma’am” gospel. It is compact, no-nonsense and gets right to it. I like Mark. Today, we are in a service at the synagogue when someone, possibly suffering from some form of mental illness, has an outburst during the sermon. You can imagine the effect that would have on the congregation. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ authority is such that he commands the unclean spirit to come out of the man.

A colleague of mine tells the story of preaching in her first call, a small Presbyterian church in Texas. During her sermon, which she had worked on for days, the back doors of the sanctuary swung open fiercely and an angry man walked down the center aisle. Everything stopped. The man stood in the middle of the room and demanded, “Bob Collier...where are you? You show your face. I think these good people deserve to know what you are.”

No answer. My friend Maggie said that she became completely useless, just standing in her pulpit, staring. The man turned to an usher by the door and asked, “Where is he?” The usher said that he didn’t think they had a “Bob Collier.” The man showed the usher a piece of paper. The usher looked at it, shook his head, pointed out the window and down the street. The man had apparently meant to go to another church. But in order to save face on his way to the actual Church of Bob Collier, he turned to Maggie in her pulpit and pointed his finger at her. “If Bob Collier ever *does* come in here, you tell him he’s in a *lot* of trouble.”

He left. There was a long silence. Then everything fell apart. The small congregation started to laugh and talk endlessly, including Maggie and the usher. “Bob Collier” became an expression in the church, used whenever someone was looking for another person, with a mock threat in his or her voice. The problem for Maggie that day was that she lost her authority for the rest of the service. Later, people told her that she looked like a deer in headlights; her face frozen and her mouth open in the pulpit. She never fully lived it down.

She drawled, “I tried to finish the sermon, but then someone started laughin’, and it grew until I was laughin’, too. So, we tried prayin’, but we started snickerin’ through that, so I just cut it short. Finally, I said, “Lord, forgive us, but let’s just pass the peace and be done with it. Amen.”

What does it mean to possess real authority, and how do you recognize it when you are in the presence of it? George Carlin once said, “I have as much authority as the Pope, I just don’t have as many people who believe it.”

Today’s scripture lesson brings Jesus from the fast-paced accounts of the previous twenty verses to where he is established as an authority. He is an authority as a teacher and a healer, and his fame spreads. Today, over two billion people claim to be followers of Jesus.

In George Johnson's class on poverty, he has us reading a book by a young evangelical from rural Tennessee named Shane Claiborne, called, "Irresistible Revolution." It took me a while to warm up to him, until he told the story of wanting to know what it meant to find a real Christian who not only believed in the authority of Jesus' teachings, but also followed them.

He shares some of the frustration many of us have felt from time to time about calling ourselves, "Christian," when the word has become synonymous with so much that is anything but. Someone once said, "I gave up Christianity in order to follow Jesus." Claiborne said that he didn't really know what a really devoted Christian looked like, or if one had indeed been around in a long time. "From my desk at college," he writes, "it looked like some time back we had stopped living Christianity and just started studying it."

Soren Kierkegaard once said,

"The matter is quite simple. The bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world? Herein lies the real place of Christian scholarship. Christian scholarship is the Church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh, priceless scholarship, what would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the living God. Yes it is even dreadful to be alone with the New Testament."

Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard, citation used in Claiborne's book.

So, Claiborne and a friend set out on a quest to find a real Christian who lived as Jesus instructed us, his followers, to live. He decided to contact Mother Teresa, and wrote her a letter about doing a summer internship in Calcutta. When she didn't reply, he and his friend decided to just call up random nuns on the phone and ask them for Mother Teresa's phone number. As you might expect, this was met with a variety of responses, until he contacted one nun in the Bronx, who gave him to her Mother Superior. She, in turn, listened carefully, asked some questions, and then gave him a phone number in Calcutta and told him not to give it out. They waited until 2:00 a.m. so that the time would be right in India, and called the number. This is the part I love: Mother Teresa answered the phone. Claiborne stammered out what it was he and his friend wanted to do, a summer internship, and she said, "Come."

They arrived and bunked in a hostel. They worked side by side with Mother Teresa and her volunteers from all over the world—as he named them, "missionary evangelicals, curious atheists, simple pilgrims and wild revolutionaries."

All of these workers came together to rescue mentally and physically handicapped children abandoned in railway stations. They bandaged wounds, washed children, cooked meals and gave hugs. They dressed the wounds of lepers. They cared for the dying, and when those had died, they went out on the streets looking for more, so that they in turn could die with dignity, as Claiborne says, "With someone loving them, singing, laughing, so they were not alone."

The needs are endless and the work among the poor, sick and dying will never stop. But, as Mother Teresa herself said, "We are called not to be successful but to be faithful." And, "We can do no great things, just small things with great love. It is not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it."

Finally, Shane Claiborne found the Christian he was looking for: a German man named “Andy,” who was in charge of the home for the dying. Andy had been a wealthy businessman in Germany who reported to Claiborne that he read the gospel and “it messed everything up.” He read where Jesus commands the disciples to sell everything and give it to the poor, and Andy actually did it. His home is now with the dying and destitute in Calcutta, and he is happy.

Isn’t it interesting though, that I would have to read a book by a young man who traveled to Calcutta in order to find a real Christian who actually did what Jesus commands us all to do, in order to report back that there’s at least one genuine Christian out of 2.1 billion of us out there?

Because, frankly, I’ll put myself on the bottom of this list. I am not going to give everything I own to the poor, as Jesus asks of his disciples. Like the rich young man in Matthew, Mark and Luke, I won’t be selling our home or my possessions, tapping out my IRA or emptying my pockets entirely for those in need. I will do the best I can. How are you doing with this Christian stuff?

Like all of us, I suspect, we will be sent sorrowfully away to be the Christians we know how to be, aspiring to reach the level higher, but perhaps never fully past our comfort zones into the radical zones.

And, we are in good company. Like Kierkegaard’s observations on Christian scholarship, Christians all over the world from every different understanding of what it means to follow the gospel, the “good news to the poor,” (as George has pointed out to our classes) have taken different colored highlighters and lifted up the passages of the Bible that resonate with us and allow us to find a place where we can call ourselves, “Christian.”

Still, the authority that Jesus possesses must be real, has to be genuine, else we would have given up long ago. The Gospel says, “They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!”

There has been cruelty, war, bigotry, assaults on the poor and minorities of all kinds in the name of Jesus. There are hucksters, dime-store preachers, sugar-coated televangelists and mud-caked politicians who claim to know the mind of Jesus.

The Ku-Klux Klan, Father Coughlin, the Westboro Baptist Church, Prop 8, Terry Jones and his Koran-burning—so many unclean spirits in the sanctuary where Jesus teaches with authority today. And yet, his authority is real... genuine... complete. The problem is that what he asks of us is just too much—he preached a gospel that asks us all to become each other’s servants and to give freely of everything we have. The history of the world thus far indicates that the possibility of finding people who practice what he preached involves a search through the gutters like that of Shane Claiborne.

Maybe we’re simply not going to the slums of Calcutta any time too soon (maybe something will dawn upon us and we will!) ...but we might be volunteering in other ways, some right in front of our faces, that will lead us to discover as those who worked with Mother Teresa, that the gift is to us, and not the other way around.

Jesus astounded the crowds in the synagogue with his teaching. He continues to astound us as well. His was a new teaching with authority. That authority must be real...has to be genuine...or we wouldn’t be here.

We can study Christianity...but we can live it, too...as best as we can. As Mother Teresa herself said, “We are called not to be successful but to be faithful.” And, “We can do no great things, just small things with great love. It is not how much you do, but how much love you put into doing it.” Amen.

Mark 1:21-28

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.