
TEACHING THAT TRANSFORMS

MARK 1:21-28

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, JANUARY 28, 2024

BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

Jesus shows us the ultimate purpose of teaching. And I know we have university professors here. Public and private school teachers. Even parents are teachers to their children. Coaches are teachers to their players. As professor bell hooks reminds us in her book *Teaching Community*, “We are not just teachers when we enter our classrooms but are teachers in every moment of our lives.” So what Jesus demonstrates in the Gospel of Mark is for all the teachers in the house. He entered the synagogue and taught.

I remember—probably like you do—former schoolteachers or professors who ignited a flame in my intellect and heart and captivated my imagination about a subject matter. They were passionate about their subject, which often made me excited about it and wanting to learn more (except in the case of my undergraduate computer science course about the C programming language—still having nightmares about that one!). But I also remember former teachers whose teaching or lessons was less interesting than watching a fly do gymnastics by a window. I remember some teachers so much that I don’t even remember their names. But Jesus, the teacher, was unforgettable and became famous because of his teaching, so famous that we’re thinking about him today.

He was like no other in the classroom of life. “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.” It was a new teaching—with authority. It was unprecedented. Different from the scribes who were the grammar gurus, the supreme interpreters of the law, the erudite scholars. Jesus wasn’t a scholar, and he probably wouldn’t have the patience for university politics anyway. But he was a teacher like no other. One with authority, *exousia*, the power to act. Something happens when he teaches. His teaching confirms what speech-act theorists teach—words *do* things.

Although there is an emphasis on his teaching in the story, nothing is actually said about the content or his particular lesson of the day. The stress is on the impact or power of his teaching, which suggests that the emphasis of his ‘teaching’ is on action and not words. Rather than a telling, it is a doing, a showing. Jesus shows us the power of teaching and doesn’t *tell* us about teaching.

I remember former teachers more because of what they did than what they said. We’ve heard it before—that you may not remember what people said, but you’ll remember how they made you feel. Teaching is like that; it’s more than a scripted lesson for the day. Something happened when my memorable teachers taught, going beyond the so-called content of a class. Teaching was about more than learning letters from them; it was about learning life. Mrs. Esch (who years later became Dr. Esch) was my second-grade teacher at Parkway Elementary School. Let’s just say she had a committed, intentional, fast paced walk as you heard her feet hit the ground. She had lots of energy and loved music. She kept an upright piano in her classroom, and I still remember her leading us in singing from that piano in her southern accent, “On top of spaghetti all covered with cheese, I lost my poor meatball when somebody sneezed. It rolled off the table and onto the floor and then my poor meatball rolled out the door. It rolled in the garden and into the bush and then my poor meatball was nothing but mush...” You can google the rest of it.

I have no clue why we sang that song but what she demonstrated was the power of music in teaching and learning in the classroom, the possibility of music as a source of education beyond words but through sounds and gestures and embodiment, linking pedagogy with acoustemology. She understood the impact of the arts on children, including myself. She was one who, like the prayer-poem says, “plant[ed] seeds...[and]...water[ed] seeds... know[ing] that they hold future promise.” And more than any specific lesson, Mrs. Esch embodied belief in me and gave me the opportunity to even say the ‘Pledge of Allegiance’ over the school loudspeaker one morning as she held my hand and walked me to the office; she was so proud. She nurtured music and public speech in me, sowing seeds for a future. Her teaching was more than words but were actions that had an influence even beyond what she could imagine. So thank you, Dr. Esch, for showing and doing as a teacher.

Teaching reminds us of other performance practices like dancing or playing an instrument. You can talk about it all day long, but it is through the doing, through the practice, through the action, that the learning and growth come. If you want to learn how to fish or golf, you have to do it, not just explain it; it is experiential learning. Something happens. And the emphasis for Jesus is on the doing, the impact, the power or authority of his teaching, what it actually does to others, revealing that teaching is so much more than the top ten teaching tricks and tips for classroom effectiveness.

His teaching authority is about power. “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” I know some teachers wish their students would listen just like that. For Jesus, the unclean spirits come out of those who are possessed because of his authority. Teachers can interpret letters but Jesus as teacher changes lives. The purpose of his teaching is not solely about information but transformation.

He reveals that the purpose of teaching is to set people free, so that they can become whole and healed. In Parker Palmer’s book, *The Courage to Teach*, he argues that education, teaching and learning are more than just about gathering information or getting a job. He writes, “Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life.” Palmer reclaims the sacred at the heart of knowing, teaching and learning and wants to reclaim it “from an essentially depressive mode of knowing that honors only data, logic, analysis, and a systematic disconnection of self from the world, self from others.”

In the Gospel of Mark, just as God is loosed in Jesus, through the teaching of Jesus, people are loosed and made whole. We may think teaching is about relaying more data, but Jesus demonstrates that teaching can rescue people from death in order for them to find the freedom to live, to live the life God has for them, not the life someone else told them to live. Sometimes we can be so confined because we are trying to live someone else’s life and not the life that wants to live in us. When the unclean spirit comes out of the man, that man no longer has to be trapped by something that is not himself. He no longer is captive to a voice that is not his own but is freed to speak his own truth and discover his own voice as he finds his way in the world. His body is freed. His voice is freed. His mind is freed. He’s healed and made whole.

Teaching in the way of Jesus leads to liberation, not incarceration nor indoctrination, so that the life that wants to live in and through you can breathe freely and not be convulsed and contorted by internal voices or perspectives or spirits that think Jesus is out to get you. “Have you come to destroy us?” the possessed man asked.

It seems like a strange question but there is a kind of teaching that kills and isn’t life-giving. Maybe this man had terrible teachers and thinks Jesus, the teacher, is just like them. He sees Jesus as a danger when he’s our savior. But this is understandable when there are some teachers in schools or even college professors who belittle students and cause them to shrink into themselves and lock their minds into little boxes of thoughtless fear, rather than expand and enlarge their imaginations, lives and hearts. There are teachers who destroy children’s spirits, unfortunately, causing those children to be lost and bound. Yet there are still so many teachers like Jesus who help the lost be found—to find their passion. To find what makes them come alive. To find their voice and agency. To find their purpose in life. To find freedom.

Jesus teaches toward transformation and reveals teaching as a form of exorcism, a teaching that transforms. In his holy classroom, we should all be set free by his power. One biblical commentator asks, “Does our teaching communicate the authority of Jesus Christ or obscure it?” (Lamar Williamson Jr.). In other words, does our teaching possess power? Does it transform others? Does it set people free? These are appropriate questions for us to consider.

But what about us? Are we free? Remember Jesus begins his teaching career in a religious setting, so he starts with us.

‘Jesus, teach us. As you did in the ancient synagogue, do today.’ “We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes” (Bernice Johnson Reagon). And it will come for “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).