

“Because I Said So”
Mark 1:21-28
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Parenting is hard. I’m assuming this doesn’t come as a surprise to anyone – even if you don’t have children yourself, you can probably guess that being solely responsible for the safety and development of a small human being who has no common sense or basic survival skills, it’s not easy. You are constantly giving instructions on what they need to do to make it through the day, they are constantly pushing back against those instructions – why should I go to bed? Why should I brush my teeth? Why not leave my toys and dirty clothes scattered throughout the house like a never ending treasure hunt? And as a parent you can try to explain the reasons for your instructions – sleep is good for you, your teeth will rot, and I don’t want to step on any more lego in the middle of the night – but the explanations don’t really help, and eventually you just fall back on the old standby, the last refuge for exhausted parents – “just do it, because I said so”. No more questions, no more excuses, just do it. Because I said so.

And “Because I said so” works, for awhile at least. It’s not an argument, it’s a display of authority – I’m in charge, and you’re not, so you have to do as I say – and when children are small and their parents are the only authority they know, they can’t really argue with that. If the child believes that you are in authority over them, if they trust that yes, you are in charge, “because I said so” works. Eventually they get a bit older, old enough to question that authority, to wonder why these clearly flawed and irrational parents should get to set the rules for their children. For now, though, Because I said so works.

Keep all of this in mind when you hear the passage we read from the Gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus teaching in the synagogue of Capernaum at the very beginning of his ministry. See, I think we sometimes think that the thing that made Jesus special, the thing that made his ministry so unexpected and transformative, was that he was teaching something entirely new. We have this very wrong idea that the faith of the Jewish people that was being taught by all the leaders and teachers of Jesus’ time, that we read about in what we call the Old Testament,

we think it was just about following rules, rules for what you could eat and what you could wear and on what days you could do what activities, and if you messed up once, a very angry God would zap you with all sorts of assorted miseries, but then along came Jesus, and he said, hey, why don't we just love each other?, and everyone said, wow, we've never thought about that before, what a wonderful new idea! And the church lived happily ever after. But all of that is wrong. Top to bottom, wrong. The God we see in the Hebrew Scriptures, the God of Abraham, Moses, David and Elijah, that God is the exact same God we meet in Jesus Christ, a God of love, of forgiveness, of overwhelming grace and mercy. And that was the God that all the other teachers and leaders of the synagogues in Jesus' time were teaching and preaching about.

They were telling the people the same things Jesus did – to Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself. Those weren't radical new ideas that Jesus just thought of for the first time, they were at the very core of the faith that all the Jewish people believed and shared. The Pharisees weren't all narrow-minded puritans who hated fun and happiness – their message would've sounded very similar to what we read in the gospels, in the sermon on the mount. What made Jesus different, what made Jesus so strange and unexpected and even dangerous, it wasn't what he said, it was the way that he said it.

Take another look at that story from Mark – the thing that surprises the people of Capernaum isn't what Jesus says, it's the way that he says it. He teaches with authority. See, the typical way you would teach in the synagogue is by teaching about the scriptures using all the wisdom and guidance of all the teachers that have gone before you – you would quote the scriptures, and you would quote all the gathered commentaries of all the great rabbis and scholars who have been reading and discussing and dissecting the scriptures for hundreds of years. You wouldn't expect people to just take your word for what the scriptures mean, you'd quote and cite all these other brilliant minds and voices who had spent their whole lives studying God's word. And of course, those scholars had built most of their thought and commentary on other people who had come before them – each generation of the people of Israel kept passing on the wisdom and faith and guidance of their ancestors, refining and

expanding as it went on, slowly and carefully and humbly preserving what was good and gradually growing closer and closer to the truth of what God's word truly meant. But Jesus didn't do that. Jesus arrives at the synagogue, and he preaches the same message of worshipping the holy, loving, gracious God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but he doesn't preach the way everyone else does. He doesn't quote experts and cite precedents and cautiously propose a possible interpretation that people might want to consider and discuss together after the service. No, He tells the people, this is who God is. This is what God wants from you. This is who you are meant to be. This is the way it is, because I say so. Jesus doesn't argue, he doesn't persuade. He preaches with authority, like a parent to a child, this is the way it is, because I say so.

And when you think about it, that's kind of shocking. You can understand why people would've been offended - this carpenter from Nazareth, coming into our synagogue and treating the holy scriptures like he wrote them, it's astonishing. We're so used to hearing Jesus described as gentle, meek and mild, the lamb of God so humble and kind, that we often miss how jarring and offensive his preaching must have seemed to those who first heard it. Jesus acts like he's the Son of God. He acts like the word of God is his word, like he has all the authority to interpret it and proclaim it and fulfill it as he sees fit. And that only makes sense if it's true. The way Jesus acted, the way Jesus spoke, the authority Jesus claimed for himself, it only makes sense if he truly was the Son of God. CS Lewis wrote that "the really foolish thing that people often say about Jesus is 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.'"

That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to." With every word he spoke, Jesus represented himself as one with authority,

authority over everything in this world, and he backed up those words with action, action that brought life and healing and strength to the people around him. Jesus demonstrated his authority again and again, but he didn't use his authority to control; in his deeds of power, Jesus used his authority to bring life - casting out evil, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, raising the dead. When Jesus called people to listen and to follow, to obey his authority as children obey their parents, he showed them again and again that this authority was rightfully his – that he was who he claimed to be, and that they could trust him to use that authority in ways that would bring life. And that left all those hearing him with that choice to make: do you believe that this carpenter from Nazareth has authority over you, over your life, over the world around you? Do you trust that Jesus is in charge?

And that's the same choice we're all called to make, when we hear the voice of Jesus Christ calling us to follow, calling us to serve. Will we put Jesus in charge of our lives? Will we submit to his authority? Will we follow the one who created us, who knows us thoroughly, who loves us unconditionally, who died to save us from death? Jesus wants to bring us good things, healing and life, freedom from sin and evil and death, but first we have to see him for who he truly is and follow him wherever he leads, to place him in command of our will and our future. And I want to make it absolutely clear that putting Jesus in charge is NOT the same thing as putting the church in charge, putting your minister in charge, putting any religious leader or human teacher or political figure in charge of your life, because that always ends badly. As Christians, we don't have the same authority to speak the way Jesus spoke, to teach the way Jesus taught.

The church has a long, ugly history of telling the world to do as we say because we say so, and we have caused so much pain and brought disrepute and dishonour to the name of Jesus Christ that we claim to represent. We need to remember that we are not in charge, we are not in control, our job is not to be the authority on everything that people should say and do in their lives. Our job is always and only to point to Jesus Christ, to tell people about the one we are following and invite them to follow him too. As Living Faith puts it, "in a spirit of humility, as beggars telling others where food is to be found, we point to life in Christ." That's what we are called to do, to put Jesus in charge of our lives, to follow his word in all that we do,

and then through every word and action, point to Jesus Christ, introduce him to the people around us through how we act and how we live and how we love, so that everyone we meet will discover for themselves what we already know, that Jesus is worth trusting, Jesus is worth following, Jesus is the one authority you can trust, the one who will never let you down. Today and everyday, may we follow Jesus Christ, so that what he says is evident in what we do and in who we are. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen!