

EPIPHANY 4B - January 28, 2018
When Jesus Talks, People Listen
(Mark 1:21-28)

I know I'm dating myself here, but years ago there were some classic TV commercials that have stayed with me ever since. Ironically, several of the most memorable ones came from the financial services industry.

For example, back in the 1970's, who can ever forget – assuming you're old enough to remember, of course – the distinguished and very proper Academy Award-winning actor John Houseman touting the prowess of Smith Barney, the wealth management firm, with his aristocratic voice, saying: “They make money the old fashioned way. They *earn it.*”

Then there was Merrill Lynch (maybe you remember this one) depicting a herd of bulls thundering across the American plains; followed by their own classic line: “Merrill Lynch is *bullish* on America.”

But my *personal* favorite, hands-down, was the product of E.F. Hutton, the well-known stock brokerage firm. In its hey-day, E.F. Hutton was once of the most respected financial firms in the U.S., and for several decades was the second-largest brokerage firm in the entire country.

But they were perhaps *best known* for a series of TV ads during the 1970's and 80's based on the phrase, “When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.” In fact, every variation of their classic commercial, whether it was set at a dinner party, or a country club, or a busy hotel lobby, or even poolside at a palatial estate, involved obviously wealthy and attractive people interacting and hobnobbing with each other until someone, in answer to being asked the question where he or she gets their financial advice, pauses, and then responds, “*Well...* my broker is E.F. Hutton, and E.F. Hutton says...”

And at that precise moment everything onscreen comes to a screeching halt, and everyone at that dinner party, or country club, or in that busy hotel lobby, or poolside at that wealthy estate immediately freezes, and stops talking, and even leans in the direction of that person in order to overhear what's about to be said.

Literally not a sound can be heard. And the implication is obvious. Something terribly important is about to be shared. After all, when E.F. Hutton talks... people listen.

...In today's gospel, Jesus and his first disciples, who we met last week – Simon and Andrew and James and John – arrived in Capernaum and, when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach. And the effect, as we just heard, was immediate and unmistakable. The people were astounded by his teaching, for he taught them – we are told – as one having *authority*, and not as the scribes.

Kind of like those old E.F. Hutton TV commercials, don't you think? At least it sounds that way to me. When *Jesus* talks, people *also* listen.

All throughout the gospels, in fact, that very point is made over and over and over again. When Jesus talks, people listen.

In other words, there was obviously something about him, something about who he was and what he had to say and perhaps how he said it as well, that was memorable and compelling. Beginning here in Capernaum and then throughout his entire earthly ministry, Jesus continually attracted these large crowds that hung on his every word.

Just like in those classic E.F. Hutton TV commercials, it's as if everything stopped, as if time itself was somehow suspended, as everyone leaned in, ears

perked, in order to make sure that they didn't miss a single word of what he was about to say.

The main thing, and the major difference Mark tells us, is that Jesus apparently did not teach as the scribes did. In defense of the scribes, however, these were clearly learned men, well-schooled in the Hebrew scriptures and in the traditions of their people. They were the experts, so to speak.

We have them today as well, don't we? Not only the academics who teach at prestigious universities, but also popular experts in nearly every field imaginable. For example, several generations of parents before making any decisions relative to their children would often first consult with what the renowned child-rearing expert Dr. Spock had to say. (Now, that's *Dr.* Spock, as in Dr. Benjamin Spock the famous pediatrician, of course, and not *Mr.* Spock, the Vulcan first officer on the starship Enterprise from TV's "Star Trek"! Just to be clear.)

And, in the same way, I once had a parishioner who would never make a single purchase unless and until he had checked out what "Consumer Reports" had to say about a particular product first. Check with the experts. We all do it, don't we?

Well, it was no different in Jesus' day. So when it came to matters of the faith, especially living *out* the faith, the scribes were it. Except when they weren't, apparently. Because just like many of our so-called experts today, the teaching of the scribes often left something to be desired. In other words, you can be really smart, and know almost everything there is to know about something, and still not be able to offer practical advice that is truly helpful. Often times, what the so-called experts have to say – in Jesus' day as well as

in our own – is just not realistic. Or fails to take into account the struggles and challenges and temptations of everyday living.

But Jesus was different. As we see over and over again in the gospels, Jesus' teaching and advice was always practical and down-to-earth. Most of all, it revealed a deep love and concern for people; especially *hurting* people.

And, therefore, it wasn't impossible or unrealistic to follow. It actually took into account, and was even sympathetic to, the ordinary struggles and challenges and temptations of everyday living. And so, in that respect, Jesus *was* different from all the scribes; those so-called experts.

Even more than that, we are told that Jesus taught and spoke with something *else* the scribes didn't have. And that was *authority*. The dictionary defines authority as the “power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior.”

The power to influence or command... thought, opinion, or behavior.

You can have self-proclaimed authorities, for instance, who have all kinds of knowledge, or even experience. But if they don't also have the power to influence or command the behavior of others, then they don't really have authority, do they?

A representative of Department of the Interior was once taking geological readings. He approached this farmer and said, “I've been authorized by the government to go out into your pasture and take some readings. Do you mind if I do that?

The farmer responded, “You can't go out into that pasture.”

So the government man got a little perturbed and said, “Mister, I have the authority of the Federal Government behind me.” And with that, he took out his official government I.D. card, as well as a paper signed by the Secretary of the Interior that *gave* him the authority to take his readings wherever he chose.

“There, see? I have the authority to go anywhere I like, including your pasture. Have I made myself clear? Do you understand?”

As the government man then started to climb over the fence into the pasture, the farmer said, “I’m telling you again. You’d better not go out into that pasture.” But the government man ignored him, so the farmer simply shrugged his shoulders and went back to his chores.

A few minutes later, while setting up his equipment in the middle of the pasture, the government man suddenly felt the ground begin to shake. Looking up, like in one of those classic Merrill Lynch TV commercials I described for you earlier, he saw this nasty old bull thundering towards him, his head lowered.

Naturally, the government man dropped his equipment on the spot, and began to run for his life. Passing the farmer, who was safely on the *other* side of the fence of course, he cried out, “Help me!” And the farmer just smirked and yelled back, “Show him your papers!”

Again, authority without power really isn’t authority.

Then there was the young henpecked husband who went to see a psychologist about his problem. The doctor told him, “Don’t let your wife bully you. Go home and show her who’s boss.”

So the young man went home, slammed the door, walked up to his wife and growled, “From now on you’re taking orders from ME! I want my supper on the table when I get home from work. I want my clothes for tomorrow laid out. And now I’m going out with the boys. You’ll be staying home taking care of all these things for me. And another thing. Do you know who’s going to dress me and tie my tie in the morning?”

And the wife simply responded, “Yep... the funeral director.”

Or there are those who have *power*, on the other hand, who can make or *force* you to do something; that is to influence or command behavior. But that’s *all* it is. Because if they can’t also influence or command thought and opinion, then *they* don’t have authority either.

Here’s an example of what I mean. A young second lieutenant down at Fort Bragg once discovered that he had no change when he was about to buy a soft drink from a vending machine. So he flagged down a passing private and asked him, “Do you have change for a dollar?”

The private answered cheerfully, “I think so, here let me check.” But the pompous young lieutenant, very full of himself, stiffened and demanded, “Soldier, is that any way to address an officer? Here, let’s start all over again. Do you have change for a dollar?”

This time, the private came to attention, saluted smartly, and shouted, “No, sir!”

Again, the power to command behavior without simultaneously influencing thought and opinion, isn’t true authority either, is it?

But here's the thing. Jesus taught and spoke with both power *and* authority, didn't he? And the proof of that is in what took place in the second half of today's gospel reading.

You see, while Jesus was amazing the people in the synagogue with his teaching, it suddenly became apparent that there was a man possessed by an unclean spirit among them. Now understanding exactly what this unclean spirit was, or represented, is very difficult for us to determine all these many years later; especially as modern people looking back at an event described by ancient people. But this much we do know. When the possessed man went into convulsions and began to cry out under the influence of that unclean spirit, Jesus immediately rebuked it and ordered the spirit to come out of the man. And it did!

Once again, the people were astonished and amazed. "What is this? A new teaching – *with authority*. (There's that word again.) He even commands the unclean spirits and they obey him!"

Again, when Jesus talks, not only do *people* listen. But so do demons apparently!

Indeed, wherever and whenever Jesus talks in the Bible, ears perk up, people listen, and even demons and unclean spirits obey him. Even nature itself obeys him. So when Jesus talks, storms are silenced and seas are calmed. Right? Moreover, his words resulted in the hungry being fed, the sick being healed, and the downtrodden receiving hope.

When Jesus talks, people listen. Indeed, when Jesus talks, literally all of creation listens and responds...

However, not always appropriately, sad to say. You see, everyone listened to Jesus, even his enemies. But that didn't stop some, especially those enemies, from ignoring or even resisting him.

A rabbi was once at odds with his congregation. The president of the synagogue said, "Rabbi, we must have a conference to settle this dispute, once and for all." So the rabbi, the president and the ten elders all met together to discuss the issue.

The rabbi, however, soon discovered that he was the sole dissenting opinion. And after some back and forth discussion, the president of the synagogue announced, "Let's take a vote now. And let the majority rule."

When the votes were all collected and tabulated, the president said, "Rabbi, you are outvoted eleven to one. We have the majority."

The rabbi rose to his feet. "So you think you are right and I am wrong because of a vote? Well, think again. For I will call on the Holy One of Israel to give us a sign that *I* am right and *you* are wrong."

Immediately a deafening clap of thunder sounded, accompanied by a brilliant flash. The mahogany table they were gathered around was cracked in two. The room was filled with smoke, and the president and the elders were thrown to the floor. Whereas, the rabbi remained standing – untouched and triumphant.

The president of the synagogue slowly rose from underneath the table. His hair was singed, his glasses were hanging from one ear, and his clothes were in great disarray.

Finally, after some time spent gathering himself, he responded, “Alright, alright, so it’s eleven to *two*. But we still have the majority!”

The moral of the story, I guess, is that even in the presence of irrefutable proof; people may still refuse to obey...

Lent, of course, is coming up in just a little over two weeks, and we are reminded in Lent about how much opposition there apparently was to Jesus’ preaching and teaching. Opposition that only grew and intensified as Jesus’ ministry began to attract more and more followers. Opposition that eventually coalesced into a successful plot to have him put to death.

But for now, at least, in these early days of that ministry, Jesus’ fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee, we’re told. Again, when Jesus talked, people listened...

And ultimately that was the problem, wasn’t it? Too *many* people listened. Too many people heard good news when Jesus spoke. Too many lives were changed for the better. But just like the president and elders of the synagogue in our story, even when *God* weighed in on Jesus’ ministry, especially at Easter, the opposition refused to back down or give in...

And what of us? In our day? When Jesus talks, do *we* listen? When Jesus talks, do we respond? Do we obey? Do *our* ears perk up? Do we stop doing whatever we’re doing at the moment so as not to miss a single word?

Something to think about. Especially on Sunday morning.

Amen.