

January 29, 2012  
Mark 1:21-28  
Creekside COB  
Pastor Betty Kelsey

### **“The Love Formula”**

**You may have heard of the governor who ran hard for a second term in office. One day, after a busy morning chasing votes (and no lunch) he arrived at a church barbecue. It was late afternoon and the governor was famished. As he moved down the serving line, he held out his plate to the woman serving chicken. She put a piece on his plate and turned to the next person in line.**

**"Excuse me," said the governor, "do you mind if I have another piece of chicken?"**

**"Sorry," the woman told him. "I'm supposed to give one piece of chicken to each person."**

**"But I'm starved," the governor said.**

**"Sorry," the woman said again. "Only one to a customer."**

**The governor was a modest and unassuming man, but he decided this time he would throw a little weight around.**

**"Do you know who I am?" he said. "I am the governor of this state."**

**"Do you know who I am?" the woman said. "I'm the lady in charge of the chicken. Move along, mister."<sup>1</sup>**

**We all know persons in authority who, through words or actions, love to show their authority. I call those people my “Mrs. Genzmer.” The real Mrs. Genzmer was an intimidating head nurse at Children’s Heart Hospital in Philadelphia. She obviously did not liked children,**

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<sup>1</sup> *Bits & Pieces*, May 28, 1992, pp. 5-6.

because her strict and criticizing nature made us all shrink in her presence. Once my friend came to visit and gave me a small gift. After visiting hours, the girl across the aisle in the ward wanted to see what I got. I threw the gift to her, missing her bed by two feet. She slid off and picked it up -- just as Mrs. Genzmer walked in. The unfriendly nurse swiped up the object, gave me a dirty look, told the girl to get back in bed, and swished out of the room. I never saw that gift again.

Years later, I met another Mrs. Genzmer -- an intimidating boss. You didn't want to be caught doing something that she thought was irresponsible or her piercing eyes and words would cut you down. When she walked into our department, we held our breath, wondering what would happen this time. It amazed me, therefore, when she was offended that she didn't receive an invitation to our wedding. Is it possible that the Mrs. Genzmers in society are not aware how others see them?

In our story, Jesus demonstrated a different kind of authority at the Capernaum synagogue. Because it was a place of learning, visiting leaders were free to speak on the Sabbath. Jesus stood up, read scripture, then closed the book and sat down. He spoke with an authority his listeners had never heard before. The Greek word "authority" literally means "out from himself." Jesus did not depend on another expert's authority -- he was the expert<sup>2</sup>. His teaching had absolute power, unlike the synagogue's scribes. "Rabbinical teaching had no inherent authority. Most rabbis were Torah teachers, meaning they only had the authority to teach the common Torah understanding of the community . . . The rabbis quoted the rabbis who quoted the rabbis who quoted the rabbis who quoted the rabbis, and that's the only authority they ever had . . . you had to be ordained by the Sanhedrin to function as an accepted rabbi . . . But there was another small class of rabbis who taught the Torah as it was revealed to them from God, and these rabbis generally traveled, had disciples, and were held in highest standing."<sup>3</sup> Jesus was this kind of teacher.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/2353](http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/2353).

**While Jesus was preaching, a demon-possessed man entered the synagogue. He had an unclean spirit, which meant being in the synagogue was an offense of its own. Besides, he was loud and disrupted Jesus' teaching. Today we might downgrade his condition as mental illness or a seizure disorder. The people of Jesus' day took demon possession seriously, however, and Jesus did too. "What do you want with us," the man cried. Identifying Jesus and his authority, the unclean spirit said, "I know you -- you are the Holy One of God; are you here to destroy us?" Jesus simply responded, "Be silent and come out of him!" Note that the worshippers did not focus on demons, the demons' words, or how Jesus exorcised them. They were amazed by Jesus' demonstration of power -- the authority to make the unclean, clean. "This must be some new kind of powerful teaching!" the people said. "He has power to order evil spirits out of people!" Jesus showed authority in both word and action.**

**In this earliest of the canonized Gospels, Mark "shows the power of God on the loose in the world as never before."<sup>4</sup> The question, "Who is Jesus," punctuates his gospel. This question demands more than a Sunday school answer. The unclean spirits recognized Jesus, but Mark does not say if the listeners jumped from "amazement" to "recognition." Something happens when that spiritual transition takes place. When Peter walked on the water and Jesus saved him from drowning, Peter exclaimed, "You are the Son of God." When Paul encountered God on the road to Damascus, God changed Paul's life direction. After years of spiritual torment, Martin Luther finally grasped that we are saved by God's grace, not our works alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, living his last days in prison for opposing Hitler, wrote that "Who is Jesus?" is the most important question we must answer. What is it about Jesus' authority that turns the world upside down?**

**Like the man with the unclean spirit, many things can hold us hostage -- chains of ideology, mental, emotional, or spiritual chains. "When I think of the demons I need to exorcise," writes author Kathleen Norris, "I have to look inward, to my heart and soul. Anger is my best demon, useful whenever I have to go into a Woman Warrior mode, harmful when I use it to gratify myself, either in self-justification, or to**

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<sup>4</sup> Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, *The Dunker Guide to the Bible*, chapter on Mark.

deny my fears. My husband, who has a much sweeter nature than I, once told me that my mean streak grieved him, not just because of the pain it caused him but because it was doing me harm. His remark, as wise as that of any desert Abba, felt like an exorcism. Not that my temptation to anger was magically gone, but I was called to pay closer attention to something that badly needed attention, and that was hurting our marriage.”<sup>5</sup>

Robert Fulghum, who wrote *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, placed alongside the mirror in his bathroom a picture of a woman who is not his wife. Every morning as he stood there shaving, he looked at the picture of that small humped-over woman wearing sandals and a blue eastern robe and headdress. She is surrounded by important-looking people in tuxedos, evening gowns and the regalia of royalty. It is the picture of Mother Teresa, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. Fulghum . . . keeps that picture there to remind him that, more than a resident of any nation, more than any pope, more than any chief executive officer of a major corporation, that woman has authority because she is a servant.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus asked people, “Who do you say I am?” “Do you love me?” “Do you believe?” These are questions to ponder as we try to grasp who Jesus really is. This account of Jesus in the synagogue and the healing of the demon-possessed man happened at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The Jesus I find in the gospels is so appealing, so authentic -- yet so misunderstood by the Jewish religious leaders. They became increasingly threatened by Jesus’ authority, and questioned him about every infraction of the law.

This is the Jesus I see. He forgave the woman caught in adultery and kept her from being stoned, while her accusers left with their tails between their legs. He forgave the prostitute, Mary Magdalene, and accepted her gift of feet washing while he sat at table with a rich man and his company. Jesus loved children. He was compassionate to those in physical and spiritual pain and healed all who came to him. He cried when Lazarus died and brought him back to life. He taught his disciples and anyone who came to listen, gems like the Sermon

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<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Norris, *My Best Demons* (sermon).

<sup>6</sup> Illustration on “authority,” author unknown.

on the Mount and the parables. He was astute when the Pharisees and scribes tried to trick him. In his death, Jesus showed us ultimate love and paved the way for a new fellowship of believers. He was a genius, yet a servant. He was powerful, yet gentle. He demonstrated an authority of love.

A battleship had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. Visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout reported, "Light, bearing on the starboard bow."

"Is it steady or moving?" the captain called out. The lookout replied, "Steady, Captain."

The captain signaled out, "We are on a collision course, advise you change course twenty degrees."

The signal came back, "Advisable for you to change course twenty degrees."

The captain grew annoyed. "I'm a captain, change course twenty degrees."

"I'm a seaman second-class," came the reply. "You had better change course twenty degrees."

Finally the captain spat out, "I'm a battleship."

Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

The captain changed course.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes we forget that we are dealing with God, and feel we can question his authority. But God is the lighthouse -- we need to change course. As I grow older I see more need for change in myself and my beliefs, I experience more forgiveness, and I become more

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<sup>7</sup> Max Lucado, [In the Eye of the Storm](#), Word Publishing, 1991, p. 153.

**convinced of God's love. I wonder how dramatically different the church would look if we fully understood what God intended it to be. The world wouldn't understand that kind of church.**

**"Prisoner at the bar," said the Grand Inquisitor, "you are charged with encouraging people to break the laws, traditions, and customs of our holy religion. How do you plead?"**

**"Guilty, Your Honor."**

**"And with frequenting the company of heretics, prostitutes, public sinners, the extortionist tax-collectors, the colonial conquerors of our nation -- in short, the excommunicated. How do you plead?"**

**"Guilty, Your Honor."**

**"Also with publicly criticizing and denouncing those who have been placed in authority within the Church of God. How do you plead?"**

**"Guilty, Your Honor."**

**"Finally, you are charged with revising, correcting, calling into question the sacred tenets of our faith. How do you plead?"**

**"Guilty, Your Honor."**

**"What is your name, prisoner?"**

**"Jesus Christ, Your Honor."**

**"And the people were amazed, and said, "This man teaches with authority, not like the teachers of the Law of Moses." Jesus demonstrated an authority of love, of inclusion, of challenging tradition and calling us to an authentic faith in God. What a mighty God we serve!**