

Teaching With Authority
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: January 29, 2012

14:27

A teacher once stood in front of his classroom and asked his students, "What do you call a person who keeps on talking when people are no longer interested?" After some thought and consideration, a hand shoots in the air, and one of his eager students yells out his response, "That person is a teacher!"

It's true, for anyone who teaches, it can feel this way sometimes. You speak for a long time; you are trying to convey a point, you need to communicate material and you want your students to understand the subject at hand even when they may not be interested.

Good teachers are truly a gift to their students and to society for that matter. Good teachers don't give up on their students, and if one way of teaching isn't working, they try something new. Good teachers know their students. They think of the specific ways they can convey the material, the examples they can give, and the methods they can use to bring the lesson to life. Jesus was a great teacher.

It's sometimes a role of Jesus' that may seem secondary. We may think of Jesus as God incarnate, the second "person" of the Trinity. We may think of him as a healer, a moral exemplar, a prophet, but he was also known for his teachings. In this passage from Mark, and we're still in chapter one of the Gospel, we already see Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum teaching. And what people immediately realize is that Jesus has a different teaching style and teaching methods than other religious leaders. This causes the people to think that he taught as "one having authority, and not as the scribes."^[1]

That seems rather harsh. But we need to understand what was so different about Jesus as opposed to these scribes. We can even think of modern scholarship, because for better or worse, it's not much different. When I began taking some of my in-depth history classes in college, we learned how to write a good historiography. In your research paper, you had to quote the expert historians and summarize their scholarship before you could state your thesis and then go into the specifics of your argument. You had to compare and contrast your interpretation with theirs and engage them in a debate of sorts before you could even begin to put forth your hopefully original thought.

Many fields of study work this way, and it's certainly true that if you are borrowing someone's idea or statement, you need to give them credit. It's also true that sometimes it feels like you can get bogged down in other peoples' research and ideas and people may wonder where your original thought or interpretation is in the first place.

So here's how this would play out in the Temple, and speaking of giving credit, I read this in an analysis by Nell Noonan, a Christian Education expert. The synagogue in Jesus' day was mostly a place of teaching and instruction. You would go there to pray and hear scripture read, but you would also hear analysis of the scripture (much like a sermon today) except it was more conversational and involved a lot more people analyzing the text. There would be many scribes (people who were professionally trained in the interpretation of scripture) and they would debate with one another and with the people in attendance.^[2] They would quote the experts, as they were trained in oral traditions handed down from generation to generation. This is the way it worked. This is the way it was always done, and then here comes Jesus changing everything.

Instead of Jesus always quoting the experts, he would say what he thought about the text, life, society right away. He didn't do a proper historiography, he didn't spend his time saying what this prophet and that scholar said about the text, he would immediately say what he thought and relate it to the lives of the people. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew in particular one of Jesus' favorite phrases is, "You have heard it said, but I say unto you..." He says it time and again.

Mark doesn't tell us what exactly Jesus teaches in the synagogue that day in Capernaum, but I wouldn't be surprised if his lesson started out like that, "You have heard it said, but I say unto you..."

Some people took this as arrogance. So the response by those in positions of authority, like the scribes—the experts, was often, "Who's this guy and what gives him the right to break all the rules?" But Jesus didn't seem to care what they had to say, and he just goes about his business, teaching with authority and actually telling the people his opinions, teaching his lessons in his own voice and in his own way.

That's why it almost doesn't matter that we don't know what Jesus says in this passage. We get to see his teachings in action because the first time he teaches in the Gospel of Mark, the first Gospel written, we see that his words and his actions go hand in hand. He teaches and then he heals a man afflicted and in pain, an outcast of society who dared to come into the synagogue seeking some compassion and healing. And Jesus doesn't disappoint him.

It's hard to go against tradition and teach in your own way, using your own methods. One of the best movies I saw about this topic, actually one of the best movies I've seen in a long time, is Moneyball. For those of you who love movies like I do, you may already know that Moneyball is up for six Academy Awards this year, including Best Picture. And here's why I love this movie —you can enjoy it on one level if you are a baseball fan and you can enjoy it on a whole different level if you are part of any organization with traditions.

In a nutshell, Brad Pitt plays Billy Beane, the Oakland A's General Manager, and he's trying to build a championship team with one of the smallest budgets in baseball. It's a movie that speaks to how unfair baseball has become and it's enlightening for all fans but also rather hopeful for anyone who cheers for a baseball team with a small budget. I love the Red Sox now that I'm here; they are my second favorite baseball team, but my heart will always be with the Cleveland Indians. And my dad also said that he would disown me if I ever abandoned my childhood home team considering he took me to more Indians games than I can even recall as a kid and is a huge Indians fan, so there's that over my head too.

But the movie is an eye opening look into the disparity between teams with huge budgets and teams with small budgets. For example, in 2011, the New York Yankees (the team with the highest payroll in baseball, go figure) had a \$202 million payroll. Compare that to the Cleveland Indians, who were number 26, with a \$49 million payroll or even the Kansas City Royals, number 30, who had the lowest payroll in all of Major League Baseball at \$36 million. Oh, and for those interested, the Red Sox are the third highest at \$161 million.[3]

So here's Billy Beane of the Oakland A's organization, they still have a small payroll at \$66 million, and he's trying to build a great team with very little money compared to some of these other clubs. He can't afford the big superstar players and he ends up, with the help of Peter Brand, a Yale economics graduate, completely going against conventional baseball wisdom and tradition when picking his team. They come up with a whole new system using sabermetric analysis to evaluate players, and it ends up that they can draft a highly competitive team with players the A's can actually afford.

Since this all came about in 2002, this method has been used by the Mets, the Padres, the Nationals, the Blue Jays, the Indians, the Red Sox, and even the Yankees, not that they really need it in the first place. One of the last scenes of the movie even shows Billy Beane in Boston at Fenway Park getting an offer to leave the A's for the Red Sox, which would have made him at the time, the highest paid General Manager in any American sport. He turns the offer down to stay in Oakland, and the Red Sox would go on to use the innovative methods Beane advocated and win the World Series in 2004.[4]

So what does this have to do with Jesus in the synagogue teaching with authority you may wonder? The point is, sometimes you have to work with who and what you have when your resources may be limited. You have to know your people. Use your imagination and dare to be different if you want to be successful and innovative. That's why I think that Jesus was a fantastic teacher and that's why I think that Billy Beane is a wonderful General Manager. Both of them, in their own ways, had the courage to challenge the status quo and challenge one of the most disturbing phrases a visionary leader in any organization can possibly hear -- "we've always done it this way."

Jesus would say time and again to anyone he met, "You have heard it said, but I say unto you..." These are the words of someone who teaches with authority, who has his own vision, who doesn't care what everyone else is doing and does it his own way. And personally, I think this is something to admire, and a method that can give any of us who work in organizations with traditions some hope for the changing times in which we find ourselves. We can and should have our own voices and our own visions; we can and should teach with authority. May it be so with us. Amen.

[1] Mark 1:22.

[2] Nell Noonan, "Words of Authority" in Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotionals 2012, 40

[3] <http://www.cbssports.com/mlb/salaries>

[4] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moneyball>