

Wesley United Methodist Church  
January 31, 2021  
Learning What Jesus Values  
Authenticity  
Scripture: Mark 1:21-28

He sounded sure of himself. His voice was loud and clear – almost frightening and quite intimidating in how loudly and confidently he spoke. He issued directions. He was all powerful. At least that's what he said. That's what they thought. Their doubts began to surface when he was not willing to keep his promise to them. "If you were really great and powerful, you would keep your promises", they protested. But soon he was revealed to be simply a man behind a curtain.

You may have recognized this man as the Great Wizard of Oz, who turned out to be not a great and powerful wizard but rather an ordinary conman from Omaha, Nebraska who has been using magic trips and props to make himself look powerful and to become the Supreme Ruler. The discrepancy between who he really was and who he claimed to be was huge.

At another time and in another place, a man was teaching about God. The people who listened to him were amazed. He didn't sound like other teachers. He spoke as if he truly knew what he was talking about. He didn't need to rely on the arguments or interpretations of others to explain what he was saying. He was forthright. He was confident. But even more than that, when presented with a challenge to his teaching, he put his words into actions. Amazed, they proclaimed, "What is this, a teaching that does what it says!"

The second man, of course, was Jesus and we heard about this in the Gospel that Mike read to us. Jesus said what he meant, and his actions were consistent with his words. And even more importantly everything he said and did was consistent with God's will. Jesus was authentic in his relationship with God and he calls us to also be authentic in our relationship with God.

Last week I talked about how Jesus calls us to be part of a team, that Jesus values teamwork and we are called to be part of God's team. If we are going to be part of God's team then we must be authentic in who we are in our lives. We can't be like the man behind the curtain in OZ pretending to be one thing and being something very different.

Authenticity means being genuine or not being corrupted from the original. For us as followers of Jesus, that means that we value what Jesus values and live our lives that way. We don't twist what Jesus said to make it work for us. We don't ignore what he said when it's inconvenient or uncomfortable. It means that our actions are congruent with our beliefs even when we may experience pressure to do or say something different.

Brene' Brown said that "Authenticity is a collection of choices that we have to make every day. It's about the choice to show up and be real, the choice to be honest, the choice to let our true selves be seen."<sup>i</sup>

What does it mean to be authentic in our relationship with God? To see that we look more closely at the event described in our Gospel reading. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. All was going well at first. People were impressed with what he was saying. Mark doesn't tell what Jesus was saying because Mark has something else on his mind here. Jesus' teaching is interrupted by a person who Mark describes as having an "unclean spirit". This man challenged Jesus' teaching and told the spirit to come out of him and to be silent. I'm not going to get into a lot of questions about what it means to have an "unclean spirit" because I don't think that's the point here.

The point is that Jesus' words cause things to happen and that is Mark's point here. In this experience Jesus demonstrates several things about God that are important for us to know if we want to have an honest relationship with God. In responding to the man, Jesus shows us that God is directly interested in people. Jesus cared about this man and the spirit that was causing him to behave in ways that created problems. He shows us that God is at our side and that whatever causes suffering to us is painful to God and contrary to what God wants for us. In Jesus, God enters into our suffering.

Jesus doesn't spend time asking the man questions. He doesn't examine him to determine whether or not he deserves to be healed. Jesus simply releases him from his suffering demonstrating God's free grace, God's love offered to all of us without regard to whether or not we deserve it. God's grace is unearned and undeserved and simply given to us.

In doing this, we see that in Jesus, words and work fit together. There is perfect harmony between who Jesus seems to be, who he claims to be and who he is. It would be great if that were true of all of us who claim to be Jesus' followers, who claim to be Christians. Sadly, too often there seems to be a major gap between what some Christians proclaim and the way some Christians behave and what Jesus taught and acted. In too many cases, the message that others seem to get is that Christianity is about judgement.

Carey Nieuwhof, a Christian podcaster, blogger and coach wrote a blog this week about this. He entitled it, "Judgmental Christians are Killing Your Church."<sup>ii</sup> In it, he identified 5 Christian virtues or values that I believe are marks of an authentic Christian, that are consistent with what Jesus values and teaches, and are not compatible with a judgmental attitude.

He points out that Love is one of the key values and key attributes of being a Christian. If we love someone as Christ does, then we see others as beloved children of God, someone worthy of love simply because they are. Throughout Jesus' ministry we see him repeatedly looking at someone with that love that wants only what is best for them.

Some translations of the gospel say that Jesus taught as one having authority. We often tend to think of someone having authority as meaning that they have power, but the word used here is not one that means power, but rather one that shows a willingness or desire that has everything to do with seeing justice served. This is the kind of authority that is about love. Jesus' words were always words of love, words that brought healing, liberation and freedom from all that causes people to suffer.

Along with this love, a second value is helping simply because help is needed, without someone needing to prove that they deserve whatever help we might be able to provide. We collect food every month to be distributed by the Northern Rhode Island Food Pantry. We do it, not knowing exactly why someone needs the food, or who will receive it. The only thing that we need to know is that people are hungry and we have the ability to help alleviate that by providing some food.

I have become aware that since we have been collecting food, someone who receives food from another food pantry, brings us what she is unable to use because she wants it to be shared with someone else who needs some help. Everyone together helping in whatever way they are able makes a difference.

Jesus never made people feel like they were less than, or that he was better than anyone else. Humility is important in an authentic relationship with anyone, and especially with God. All of us are imperfect people who often make mistakes and do things that we wish we hadn't done. We say things, or think things that we know are not what God would want us to be doing.

The good news is that God loves us so much that God forgives us for those things. When we remember this, we realize that we are just like everyone else that God loves. All of us stand in need of God's love and mercy and grace. When we realize this, when we live with this, we see others the same way and we approach them not as if we are better than someone else, but rather that we are the same.

Carey Nieuwhof points out that very few people are judged into life change, but many people get loved into it. When we relate to others out of God's love, out of true humility, God can use us to help bring transformation to the lives of others.

An authentic relationship with God includes loving others as God loves us, helping others when we are able, having the humility to have a realistic viewpoint of who we are, and centering all of this in prayer – prayer to be open to God's leading, prayer to ask God to guide us in all things, prayer to help us live our lives in ways that truly reflect who God is, and who we are in God.

Finally, evangelism is an important part of our lives as Jesus' followers. It means telling others about Jesus in whatever ways we can. This generally does not mean standing on a street corner talking about God. It definitely doesn't mean confronting people by judging what we think they are doing wrong and trying to scare, bully, or push them into changing. God didn't ask us to judge the

world, but God did ask us to love the world. By living out that love in our daily lives, we are helping others to know about Jesus in small ways that can make a difference.

We live in a world that is badly wounded and that needs to know God's love. The best way that we can help others to know God's love is to live our lives in ways that are authentic, in ways that do not corrupt Jesus' teaching, but rather live out and reflect what Jesus values: teaching that does what it says.

At the beginning of our service, we heard a song, "Wounded World that Cries for Healing". In that song we heard about how "dollars ration out compassion, and hard decisions rule the day". That is a true reflection of a dilemma that faces our world all the time, but there is also the plea or prayer that "in our common quest for wholeness," we will "heal each other by our care."<sup>iii</sup> Healing can and will come to our world, when we live an authentic life that models God's love, helping others, having humility, and praying. In living this way, we will also help others to know God's love and care.

Let us pray.

Loving God, help us to live in ways that show your love others, in and through our lives. Help us to live in with authenticity as we live in you. May we live in ways that reflect the prayer of St. Patrick, "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise." May we live so that Christ is the center of our lives. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Brown, Brene. Facebook.com/Quotes by women.

<sup>ii</sup> Nieuwhof, Carey. "Judgmental Christians are Killing Your Church" [5 Ways Judgmental Christians Are Killing Your Church - CareyNieuwhof.com](https://www.careynieuwhof.com/5-Ways-Judgmental-Christians-Are-Killing-Your-Church/)

<sup>iii</sup> "Wounded World That Cries for Healing" in Faith We Sing #2177