



Sermon: June 13, 2021

Scripture Reading: Mark 2:1-12

The Message:

Facing Off With Authority:
Securing Their Attention

[Video Version](#)



**The Rev.
Scott Beckett**

Let me tell you a story. Sometimes, we do not know everything that we should. I am the type of person who likes to have an answer when someone asks me a question. But I am not all-knowing and there are some pretty significant gaps in my understanding of certain topics. There are things that I just won't touch, like sports regulations or most physics among many, many others, but I catch myself sometimes offering answers that I am not sure of, and only arrived at because of fragments in my memory and leaps of intuition. Not exactly foolproof. I have gotten better at being more humble, and in these instances offering what info I can but always qualifying it with "but I am not sure" or even offering to help get more information. A number of weeks ago, I was doing my grocery shopping and walked a little too close to the meat counter because a woman turned to me as I approached and asked, "do you know which of these steaks is best?"

Now, I don't know what about me screams expert on beef but I can assure you, dear listener, that I am not. I may have worked in a grocery store meat department for four months, but I didn't learn anything. A lot of that job was parroting vague cook times I had heard longer-time staff mention and that was not information that I chose to retain. So this woman and I, squaring off in the Loblaws meat aisle, her finger directed at the meat under the glass, no employees to be found, I was thrust back into that time of years ago, where customers would get mad if you said you didn't know. So I gave the diplomatic answer I had developed during that summer: "it's all down to preference, you can't really go wrong. Tenderloin is the most popular, but go with whatever you feel confident in cooking." And then I walked away. That was not really helpful advice, and I had very little to offer to that situation. But I wanted to be helpful. Best of luck to her and her stovetop.

Our story in scripture today has very little to do with steak, but has a great deal more to do with knowing stuff. At least, that's a component. We see Jesus in a house that is absolutely surrounded by people. They are all gathered around him, and others are pressed in from various sides, trying to see or at least hear the words from this new, exciting teacher that people had been hearing about. Jesus had been doing some healing around nearby villages, and despite his best efforts, people were catching wind of him and his connection to God. Then we get the paralyzed man, brought by four of his friends who are carrying him on his sleeping mat. They are hoping that their friend can receive a miraculous healing himself. The scripture doesn't tell us from where his paralysis comes, if it was the result of a stroke, or some kind of fall. It's hard to imagine it was the latter because they take the man and his mat up onto the roof, desperate to find a way through the crowd of people. They make a space in the thatched roof to peek through, seeing Jesus seated there surrounded by all kinds of people, some who are officials and teachers themselves, and others that are just regular people. They get to the spot directly above Jesus and pull away some of the roof. The teacher looks up at them, noticing them as the people above him each take the corner of a mat and begin reaching downward, desperately trying to safely get it to the floor. Others in the house stand up, noticing that there is a person lying on it, and help to get it safely to the ground. Jesus is blown away by the way this community has come together to take care of their own, and does the healing, forgiving his sins. The man would be able to pick up the mat he had been bound to and carry it with him.

This is a lovely story. It is not only an additional example of Jesus using his power to minister to people, but I love it for the community of people who form around this man in order to help him. We can imagine that this group of people has already been involved in the man's care for as long as the paralysis has been a problem. But that is not the piece I want to focus on today. Instead, I want to turn to this middle section and the sort of telepathic argument between Jesus and "the scribes" who are present for this healing. As it is teased out in the text, the scribes are a little taken aback by the way Jesus presumes to forgive sins, as only God is supposed to do that. They don't say so, but Jesus is able to sense what is happening via spiritual power, and decides to address them as though they had spoken. He reveals himself to be the Son of Man, a representative of God on earth, and capable therefore of forgiving sins. He demonstrates that he does not choose this language on a whim, and tells the man he has healed to get up and walk, which might have been what would be expected of a non-divine spiritual healer, I suppose.

Now, this interaction is a little weird. Why is Jesus picking a fight with people that aren't even saying anything? His position and teachings are not being undermined, he is busy doing good things, but he decides, I need to take a beat in order to take away any doubt about what I'm doing and what I'm saying. But the people he is trying to help aren't concerned. It is just the scribes, part of the religious structure at the time, who even think something like that. It seems like Jesus shouldn't be so concerned about this. But the presence of this moment says something not only about Jesus, but how we should be looking at this story and the stories of Jesus all together.

We know that Jesus and other teachers of the faith do not get along. Many stories exist in which the sect known as the Pharisees and Jesus disagree about proper procedure and theology, some of which come directly after this story of healing paralysis. Eventually, these figures are involved in the plot that leads to the death of Jesus, using violence to essentially end the arguments they were having in an attempt to secure their own authority. But in this instance, Jesus picks the fight. He starts this process of conflict that will eventually lead to his death. Jesus knows what he is getting into, and uses this moment not only to make an important claim about his identity, but is also able to do a pretty vivid and memorable piece of healing. So this moment serves both a ministerial purpose, but also a "political" one. Just because opposition is silent does not mean that it is not important to address. The scribes in this story seem to be in the house with Jesus, amidst the people that Jesus is trying to teach and serve. They would be seen as educated and wise, and their reactions, even non-verbal ones, might impact those around them, closing their ears and hearts to what Jesus was trying to say and show to them. As we will see in other stories, sometimes the thoughts and beliefs of these religious officials was hurtful and oppressive to the people of Israel, and Jesus made it clear that their teaching and opinion is informed by some of these beliefs. We as the reader are not aware of these things necessarily, if we are reading this text for the first time. But Jesus was aware. Jesus knew that the religious officials were unjust figures in society. He knew that there would be disagreement with them, and that this disagreement would ultimately be dangerous. But Jesus decides it is better to be proactive than to simply wait for that inevitability. The instant he senses resistance, he speaks out against them. He establishes his own authority to speak to matters of faith. He lays the groundwork for those who are there that he will not be smothered by the whim of "authority" but will speak for truth and justice where it is needed. Jesus displays his commitment to serving the people, all people, who are in need of a voice.

Silence can still be oppressive. I think as children we are taught about bystanders in terms of bullying, and that though a bystander is innocent because they are not involved in any assault on someone else, but should be morally obligated to step in where possible to prevent a recipient from being hurt. At least you aren't a bully though, good job on that. Unfortunately, bullying is not the same a systemic oppression, the kind that Jesus was in part trying to combat in his time and which is present in our world as well. Bystanders in these terms doesn't really work. We are all part of the system, and we are all involved in some way, whether we are silent or not. Following the discovery of the child cemetery at the residential school in Kamloops BC,

there have been a variety of reactions. Much focus has been placed on the Catholic church, looking for some apology for their involvement (which at time of writing has not yet happened in full), and the prime minister has made statements about our need to acknowledge the history and existence of residential schools. Our own moderator put out statements, pointing to the role that the United Church played in operating residential schools of our own. We are in a period of mourning and acknowledgement. But at times, I wonder what will happen when the news cycle turns over. The First Nations here in Canada have been constantly under fire from authorities, both religious and governmental over the course of their history and that has not stopped into the present day. The discovery of the graves at Kamloops has launched residential schools back into the spotlight, but this is a conversation we have BEEN having. We have always known that children at these schools were missing, that they had likely died and been buried without the knowledge of their families. But these facts have not stopped the government from being slow in restoring drinkable water to indigenous communities. It has not stopped the incursion on traditional and unceded territories by oil and other resources extraction companies. Has the new Action Plan for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women suddenly birthed any action toward the systemic issues with law enforcement in this country?

When Jesus encounters silence, he speaks truth. Indigenous people have been speaking into this nation's silence since its beginning. What is clear in the words and actions of indigenous activists is that they will continue to endure what is thrown at them. But we need to remember our place. We are the people in the house, gathered around Christ and taking in the teaching. First Nations peoples are lowering down the victims of our ignorance, the people we have turned our back to, blocked from entering the house. How we react to seeing the brokenness that exists in our community says a lot about how aligned we are with Jesus, who reacts with love embodied in healing action. Will you judge the methods by which help is offered, like the scribes? Will you stay silent, unwilling to engage? Or will you reach up and help the mat be lowered before Christ so that healing can begin?

To put this another way, our role is not to speak on behalf of indigenous people BUT our allyship can only help to uplift their voices and justice being worked on. This state of restoration of justice isn't something new that we are looking for: we are looking for a restoration of respect and cooperation between indigenous peoples and settler peoples that was the understanding when contact was made. Our relationship, now paralyzed, must be permitted to walk again. We can only get there by being honest, and believing that we all have a role to play. Like Jesus, we must not ignore the silence and the oppression that hides within it. We cannot let the memory fade, we cannot let our discomfort get in the way of justice. We must acknowledge who we are, who Jesus is, and how that leads towards a demand for change.

In this story, Jesus is not afraid to draw the attention of those in power. He is the Son of Man, a title that will not gel with their expectations. But Jesus does not say the easy thing, he says the true thing. So as we continue to listen, as we continue to hold space for the hard truths that we are brought in all areas of our lives, ensure that your attention is held. Be willing to face up to the difficult choices, and take action to support oppressed peoples now and into the future. The truth is not something that should be blown away by the news cycle. Christ calls us to bind together as a community, a diverse community, and safely bear one another into the future.