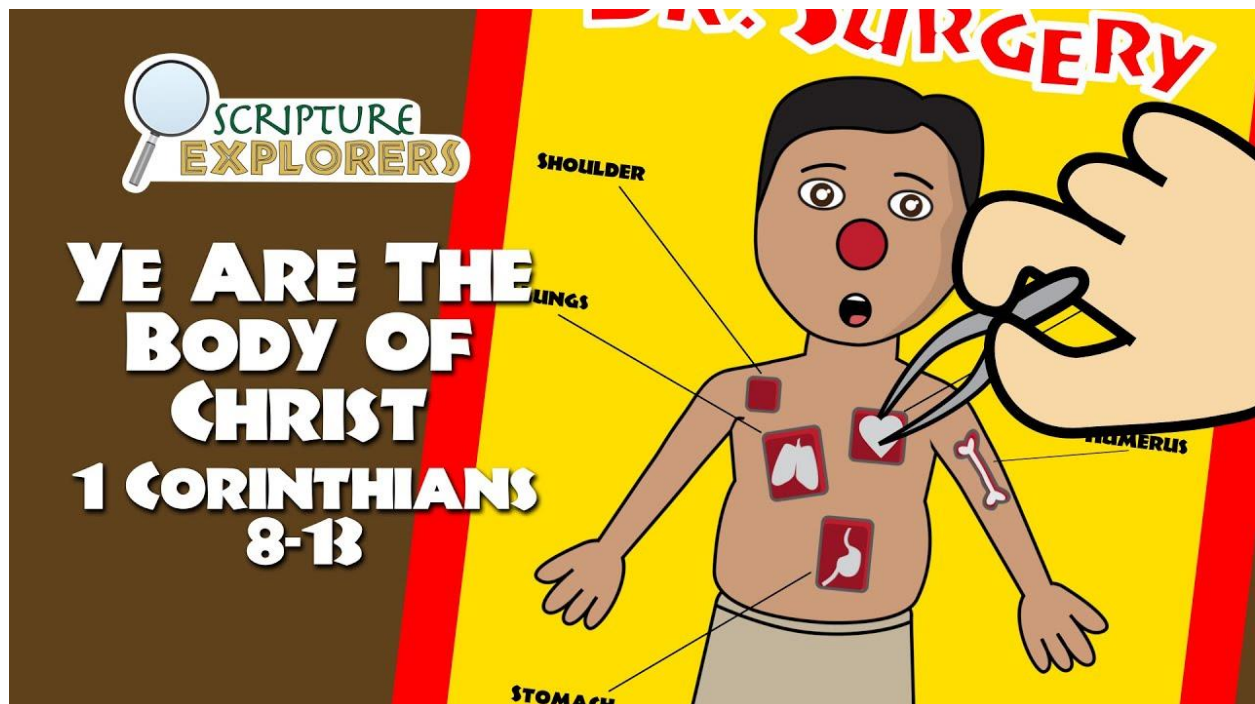


Mark 1:21-28
Year B





The church exists because of Jesus Christ. Christ has called the church into being. Christ is the source of its life, its purpose and its mission.

The church is **not** a sociological project to see how a group of dissimilar people will organize themselves. The church is **not** a psychological experiment to understand how individuals move towards greater self-awareness when they come together with others each week. The church is **not** an anthropological study to observe the effect of ritual over a sustained period. The church is about responding to the call of Jesus Christ who has gathered us together. We have no reason to come together except that we've been called by Jesus Christ.

We're not in the church to be a part of a social welfare agency or educational entity. We're not in the church to collectively make a profit or improve dividend payments to shareholders. We're not here because people need something to do. We're here because of Jesus Christ.

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Christ all that happens in the church is meaningless. It may be pretty; it may be enjoyable; it may even be beneficial; but without Jesus Christ, it is ultimately meaningless.

He has an authority given to no one else. It is astounding authority. It's first on display in that synagogue in Capernaum where he begins his teaching ministry. People notice his authority right away. It marks him as different. He doesn't teach like the scribes do. How do they teach? We don't know. Perhaps their teaching is marked by sameness or dullness or resignation. Controlled. Predictable. Perhaps the people listen to them with the sense of having heard it all before. Whatever the case, it's clear that Jesus is different. What marks him as different is the authority he expresses. His is a vital Word, a living Word, a Word on target, a Word that challenges and convicts and inspires.

In the solemn stillness of Christmas Eve worship last month, many of us heard the poetic opening of John's Gospel unfolding the mystery of the incarnation: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:1, 19). The candlelight mysteries of Christmas are made more evident in the spotlight Mark shines on these beginning scenes of Jesus' ministry: Jesus enfleshes the Word of God, and through Jesus' words others encounter the mercy and grace that is at the heart of God's being.

His word makes a difference. And people are astounded. Here is something worth listening to. Here is something with meaning and purpose and power. Here is something authoritative. Here is someone authoritative.

His word makes a difference. We see that as Jesus heals the man in Capernaum with the unclean spirit. Seizing the man, the spirit cries out. Jesus speaks to it: "Be silent and come out of him" (v. 25). It's a command that makes a difference, and the spirit releases the man. It's the word of Jesus that heals here, not an action, not a touch but a word. It is astounding. It is amazing. "What is this?" the people ask, "A new teaching – with authority" (v. 27).

His word makes a difference. His word changes people. The man is healed, restored and made well — because of the Word of Jesus, because of his authority.

It is that same authority that gives life and meaning and purpose to the church. The church exists because of Jesus Christ, and what we do in the church is significant insofar as it points us to Christ.

The Bible is meaningful because it points us to Christ. A sermon, a song, a sacrament — all have meaning as they point us to Christ. The beauty of our worship spaces is not in stained glass or soaring ceilings, not in compelling colors or engaging images. Our worship spaces are beautiful in the ways that they direct us to Jesus Christ and his glory and majesty and splendor.

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We don't simply give money to the church because we want to support a social service agency or a community center or an arts organization. We give to the church to sustain and extend the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we give in response to his authority in our lives. Likewise, we participate in the church's mission, offering our time and talents, not just to do good things, but rather to bear witness to the power and promise of the gospel — or, as Jesus himself puts it in the Sermon on the Mount, to let our "light shine before others that they may see our good works *and give glory to your Father in heaven*" (Matthew 5:16, emphasis mine).

The church exists because of Jesus Christ. All things exist because of Jesus Christ.

It's amazing, astounding and true!

Questions for reflection

1. Compared to the other New Testament Gospels, the Gospel of Mark presents little material before the start of Jesus' public ministry. There

are no stories of Jesus 'birth or childhood; and his baptism and wilderness temptation are treated with minimal details. Just 20 verses into chapter one, Mark is already describing Jesus 'ministry of teaching and healing. What effect does Mark's narrative pace have on you as a reader?

2. The people in Capernaum are astounded by Jesus 'words. What may have elicited that feeling from them? Where else in the gospels does Jesus speak or act in ways that amaze and astound?
3. Jesus is described in this passage as having authority. What is the basis of his authority? How does his authority compare to other authorities in our lives? What are the distinctive marks of Jesus ' authority?
4. One of the themes of this passages is the power of words. What are particular words in the church – and in your life – that for you are especially powerful?