

31 January 2021

Writings: Learners

The people in the Synagogue asked one another "What is this? A new teaching, with authority" (Mark 1:27).

Although I am not a teacher, I have spent a lot of time as a Priest instructing people about their faith. Based on my experience, I have realized most people fall into one of two categories: there are oral learners and visual learners. Oral learners like to have everything explained to them through words whether they are communicated by an instructor or a book. They tend to think in abstract terms and construct in their minds the idea being taught so they can understand it. Visual learners prefer to learn things through experience. They tend to think in concrete terms and like to see, hear or touch things. Once an idea is demonstrated in a hands-on way, they understand it. Although I am an oral learner, I know if I want to teach others a religious concept, I need to be able to reach both types of learners.

In today's Gospel, Jesus teaches with authority in the Synagogue at Capernaum and then reinforces this perception by driving an unclean spirit out of a man. His action appeals to both the oral and visual learners in the crowd.

When Jesus started teaching in the Synagogue, he had no real credentials to do so. He was neither a Rabbi nor Scribe who would have been formally trained to know the Law and how to interpret it. His listeners would not have known he was the Son of God. His knowledge and explanation of the Scriptures left quite an impression. He likely didn't just give a summary of the opinions of respected Rabbis as the Scribes would have done, but actually spoke out of personal experience and conviction. All the oral learners in the crowd would be satisfied.

With the arrival of the man with the unclean spirit, the situation changed. It is one thing to demonstrate your knowledge of Scripture to help people get closer to God but another to be faced with a real-life situation where one's faith is tested by the effects of sin. Even if the man was suffering from a mental illness and not demonic possession, the corrosive effect of such experiences on people's trust in God can be devastating. Jesus demonstrates in a hands-on way (which the crowd could see, hear and touch) how God's power, exercised through Christ, is greater than the effects of sin. For the visual learners in the crowd (and perhaps the oral learners as well) the authority of Jesus is undeniable.

All disciples of Jesus are called to share the Gospel message about Christ's identity and mission with others. This proclamation must be shaped to reach both oral and visual learners. Some will be touched by the words of Scripture and explanations about their meaning. These individuals strive to construct an understanding of the world which all the dimensions of human existence. Others will be touched by actions which make these ideas and beliefs credible in the real world. These individuals strive to find a way to live which helps them find meaning in their daily experiences and better cope with them.

During this Covid 19 pandemic, Christ's disciples may need to find new ways to share their faith. Our tradition helps us deal with life's "big" questions about why such events happen, how we can find hope in the midst of suffering and what are the limits of human knowledge. Oral learners may appreciate having conversations about such topics. Our tradition reminds us how love of neighbor is not an abstract idea but must be expressed in concrete terms through caring for the sick, helping those who have lost their jobs and sacrificing person freedom for the common good. The credibility of the Gospel they proclaim depends upon how well they draw on Christ's authority in both ways he demonstrated it.

Being a disciple of Jesus is a constant learning process. We are called to share what we learned with others. When we are aware of how people learn differently, we can be more effective disciples.

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