

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Deut. 18:15-22; Psalm 111; I Cor. 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

**Who Says?**  
Martha Jane Raedels

### **Introduction**

Just after I graduated from college, and before I married, I got a job teaching second grade. Among my students was the prototype of Dennis the Menace. He could have been the original one. In fact, he was even named Dennis.

Dennis couldn't leave anybody or anything alone. He would pick up any book, lunchbox, pencil, or coat that one of the students had put in a certain place for safekeeping and bring it to me. With a great deal of self-importance, Dennis would say: "Miss Quinn, I'm turnin' in this pencil." Or "I'm turnin' in this book, Miss Quinn."

This caused confusion everywhere. None of the other students could put their things down for even a few minutes and expect them to be in the same place when they returned.

One day on the school ground at recess, Dennis came running to me with a coat he had found under a tree, and he said: "Miss Quinn, I found a lost coat." In exasperation, I asked: "Dennis, why do you think that coat is lost?" He looked at me as if I had lost my mind. He held up the coat, looked at it, shook it a little bit and said: "Well, there ain't nobody in it."

Dennis the Menace kept us in a state of confusion.

For the first few days I was teaching, every time I gave the class some instructions about what we were going to do next, such as "It's time to put away our math books and get out our spelling books," Dennis would look up with a fighting expression and ask: "Who says?"

"Who says?" is not a bad question for us to ask once in a while in moderation. It gives expression to an important consideration: "What authorities do we obey in our lives?" It reminds us that we need to establish and evaluate the validity of the authorities we honor and respect.

### **Part I**

At issue in the Old Testament reading for today is the establishment of a prophet's authority. The Old Testament says it is the one whose prophecy comes true who speaks the authentic Word of the Lord.

At issue in the New Testament reading is the establishment of the authority of Jesus of Nazareth. That critical issue will surround his entire ministry in the Gospel of Mark as different people respond to his authority and power in different ways. We already know some of the questions they will ask: "Why does this fellow speak in this way?" "Who then is this, that even the wind

and the sea obey him?” “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?” “Are you the King of the Jews?”<sup>1</sup> In other words, “Who says?”

Our Gospel reading for today contains the first of many such questions.

Jesus goes to the Synagogue to teach. We expect teaching to take place there, because that's where the scribes teach. They're the authorized biblical scholars of the day, doctors of the law they are sometimes called, and on the Sabbath they give their instruction to the people. Presumably the scribes are a little too predictable, maybe even a bit boring, in their interpretations, because people immediately recognize the difference in Jesus' teaching and in theirs. “Hey, this is good stuff,” they begin to say to one another. “This man knows what he's talking about.” “He speaks as one with authority, and not like those others who just read from the textbook.”

All of us know the difference between a good teacher and a poor teacher, don't we? We've spent countless numbers of hours in classrooms. We've become very discriminating about teachers. It's exciting when a really good one comes along.

My Ninth Grade English teacher was good. She would come into the classroom, sit on her desk, (that was too cool) and begin to chat about poets and authors as if she knew them personally. She would read poems or sections of prose with great feeling, and punctuate the selections with anecdotes about the historic times in which these writers lived. When she gave writing assignments, she would choose one she really liked to read to the class. Over the course of the year, she managed to find something to read from every student's work. As a learner sitting at her feet, I fell in love with the written and spoken word.

Jesus is teaching a new teaching in the synagogue with an authority that comes from his love of the subject, and with a power you and I still hail today, and the people are eating it up. They are astounded--when suddenly there is a disruption in the classroom/synagogue. Jesus is interrupted by a voice--the voice of an unclean spirit. Dennis the Menace, with his persistent checking out of authority, would pale in comparison. This voice challenges Jesus' power, raises the issue of Jesus' identity, confronts Jesus authority, knows who Jesus is, even though the disciples won't figure that out until after the resurrection, and calls Jesus by name: “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God!” declares the voice of the spirit that is hostile to God.

The people sitting in the sanctuary at that moment believe that if an unclean spirit can name the one he confronts, the unclean spirit will gain power. It's a confrontation between the two opposing powers in the world, good and evil, that the worshippers witness that day. What a challenge to Jesus of Nazareth.

And where does it take place? In the place of worship of the people of God. Jesus first confronts and defeats the powers of evil in the place of worship of the people of God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 2:7; Mark 4:41; Mark 6:3; Mark 15:2

<sup>2</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr, *Mark, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1983) p. 50

We think temptation happens out there somewhere, don't we? Out in the world where our decisions as Christians affect our moral and ethical actions.

In here, as we worship, that which would defile God's holiness and truth can challenge God's authoritative claim on our lives. Can try to make us unenthusiastic: lukewarm in our worship and unwilling to give him our all in all in our commitment; unwilling to sit up and take notice and say: "Hey, I'm hearing his teachings in a new and fresh way and I'm acknowledging his authority in my life. I'm astounded. I'm amazed. I'm finding new ways to be obedient."

Maybe the real challenge takes place at the point of worship and commitment.

## **Part II**

Yet, we can know from what happens next in the story that we can face forces hostile to God and count on the living presence and power of Christ to help us overcome them. For, you see, on that day so long ago, Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit. "Be silent." (It's not quite a "Shut up" I guess, but it's forceful enough.) "Be quiet! Cease! Cease your disruption and come out of the man whose voice you're using." And the unclean spirit does. And the people in the synagogue that day, the eyewitnesses to the power of Jesus' Name, can't stop asking one another: "What is this?" They try hard to figure out what has just happened. "It's something new in the world," they say. "It's a new revelation. We've never seen anything like this! A new teaching! With authority he instructs even forces hostile to God, and they obey."

That's what happened one day in the synagogue when Jesus went there to teach. The worshippers were first astounded, then disrupted, then amazed. And they began to spread his fame everywhere.

## **Conclusion**

We know the rest of the story. This very day we will remember it at the Table of his self-giving love. He continued to teach and preach and heal, and the questions became ever more confrontational. Finally, on the cross, he challenged all evil everywhere. And from the empty tomb, God who raised Jesus from the dead, confirmed in no uncertain terms: "My authority is supreme over life and over death and over every power that would hurt or destroy."

So come to the Table. Remember and give thanks. See, all is made ready.

**Response of the people: (Sung)**

*All hail the power of Jesus' name,  
Let angels prostrate fall.  
Bring forth the royal diadem,  
And crown him Lord of all.  
Bring forth the royal diadem  
And crown him Lord of all.*