

## **“Not As the Scribes”**

**Mark 1:21-28**

**February 1, 2009**

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A few weeks ago in the Bible study, I shared that once in a while, maybe two or three times a year, I have an unusual dream. In that dream, I dream that I am flying. Not on an airplane, just . . . flying. I don't have to flap my arms or anything like that. I just fly—I sail and soar and swoop down to the ground. It is a wonderful experience. Let me ask you something. Do any of you ever have a dream like that? Raise your hand if you do. Here's someone. Before you think, “the poor guy has just completely lost it,” let me tell you that I've done some research, and there are certain types of individuals who do have this kind of dream. It is a tremendously liberating experience; liberating from gravity—literally, to be able to fly the way the birds fly.

Last week I had such a dream. It was the first one for this year, the first one in several months. Something happened that was different in this dream. One thing that was different was that I was able to fly higher than I usually do. Something else was different, too. I'm not sure if this was part of the dream or was in that time when you wake up after the dream. As I was coming in to land, I ran into a flock of geese.

You've heard about that, haven't you? Most of us know them as Canadian geese. Remember the incident in New York City a couple of weeks ago? A plane ran into a flock of these geese. The scientific name for this type of goose is “poopus humongous.” If you've ever been on a walking trail or a golf course around water, you know why they have that name. Those geese who occupy those particular areas are known as poopus humongous . . . among us. When I crashed into the geese, feathers and you know what flew everywhere, but I was able to make an emergency landing. I was close to the Arkansas River. Being close to the Arkansas River is even better than being close to the Hudson River, because I glided in and landed on a sandbar. I didn't even get wet.

In the scripture today as I prepared for this sermon I noticed

something new and different that I have never noticed before. I've preached on this passage of scripture before, but this sermon is not a rerun. I've never preached this sermon before. You have heard sermons preached about this. There are certain things that just jump out at us. In some versions of the Bible in the first chapter of Mark, we read the word *immediately* nine times. *Immediately* Jesus went into the synagogue; *immediately* there was a man there with an unclean spirit.

Fred Craddock has written several books. Did you know that the very first book Fred Craddock wrote was titled "As One Without Authority." It refers to Jesus as having authority in this scripture; authority that evidently the scribes didn't have. Then there is a strange story of a man with a demon. Can you imagine this happening in our worship service? Imagine anything happening that is not printed in the bulletin. Once in a while, I want to pray this prayer: "God, today let something happen that's not printed in the bulletin. Help us to wake up to your presence in our midst."

Then there is this strange phrase that I had not noticed before. "Jesus taught them not as the scribes taught them." I've done some research on the scribes. The scribes were keepers of the law. They not only kept the law, they expanded the law by adding rules and regulations for everyday life. Those rules and regulations had become a burden on the people.

A man by the name of Gerhard Frost, a poet, wrote one poem that I have used for years at graveside services. It is a very meaningful poem to me. I read some other words that Gerhard Frost wrote about our scripture today. Listen to what he said:

"When your options are either to revise your beliefs or reject a person, look again. Any formula for living that is too cramped for the human situation cries for rethinking. Hard cover catechisms are a contradiction to our loose-leaf lives."

Don't you love that? We all live loose-leaf lives. We make mistakes. We have regrets. We sin. It is a part of the human condition to live loose-leaf lives. We don't need anyone to remind us how bad we are. We know that ourselves, don't we?

The scribes were caretakers of the law. The scribes also wrote; that's what we know them for mainly—transcribing. This is my insight

into the scripture that I had never realized before. The scribes literally scratched the surface. With their quill pen they would write scriptures so scriptures could be maintained. No printing presses in those days. Did you know that the Dead Sea Scrolls were scrolls that scribes had recorded? Doesn't our faith call us to do something more than just scratch the surface? That was the difference in Jesus' teaching. In his teaching, he taught things that mattered to people.

How often in the church we are experts at just scratching the surface. I heard about one Sunday School class that studied the entire Bible in a year. Think about that. The entire Bible in 52 Sundays. That's scratching the surface, folks. We like that in the church, don't we? We don't want anyone to get too close to us; we don't want to get too close to anyone else. We don't want anyone to know our secrets. Heaven forbid that anyone in the Sunday School class or some other kind of small group would be able to open up and say, "This is something I'm struggling with in my faith journey. I need your help with this." We scratch the surface and sail through the Bible in a year. I call this kind of religion "religion from the neck up."

Religion from the neck up means there is no guts, there is no courage to do the things that Christ calls us to do. Religion from the neck up means there is no funny bone. I read recently that we should never take ourselves too seriously because no one else does. In the church we're experts at taking ourselves too seriously, aren't we? I should also add that we should never take ourselves too lightly, because Christ never takes us lightly. We should never take ourselves too seriously. We should admit that we have a funny bone and it's all right to enjoy some things just for the sake of fun.

I promise you, if you come by our house today between 5:00 and 5:30, whenever the kick off for the Super Bowl is, you won't find some kind of religious programming on our television at that time. We won't be watching some Martha Stewart show about how to make decorations out of recycled toilet paper holders. Religion from the neck up means that you don't have a funny bone.

Religion from the neck up also means there's no heart, there's no passion, there's no *compassion* in what we do. Our God calls us to go beyond scratching the surface. Our God calls us to use our hearts in our religion as we love each other.

A man by the name of Ruelll Howe has written some words about our scripture that I especially appreciate. Howell said,

“Whereas many of the religious people of Jesus’ time were setting up categories by which to exclude others, Jesus included these people. He not only included them but affirmed them and led them from where they were to where they needed to be. The only people he excluded were the excluders—the Pharisees, the scribes, the money-changers in the temple, and a few others. Finally, however, his life ended in a death which he offered in behalf of all people, an act of inclusion extended even to those who excluded him. As a result of this inclusion, there was manifest on the face of the earth a power for living that cannot be measured.”

This day our God says to us “You’re not scribes. You’re called to do more than just scratch the surface.” In the church, we know how important it is to have prayer groups. What do we do in those prayer groups? We buy every book we can get our hands on to read about prayer while God is saying to us, “I never called you to read books about prayer, I called you to pray.” In the church, we can get together and talk about how bad things are in the world. We can talk about the situation of world hunger, while God is saying to us “I didn’t call you to feel bad about this, I called you to feed hungry people.” In the church we can pray for someone who is in the hospital, pray that they will get better while God says to us “I not only called you to pray for those people, I called you to offer healing to them.” In the world we can pray that there will be peace in the Middle East, peace in our own lives, while God says to us, “I not only call you to pray for peace, I call for you to make peace.” How often we can talk about sharing our faith when God says to us, “I not only call you to share your faith, I call you to *live* your faith.” How often, just as the scribes, we can become caretakers of the church when God says to us, “I never called you to be caretakers of the church, I call you to build the church.”

Earlier I mentioned the dream about flying. That is a dream that I have for our church. It is a dream I have for each of you, that you would be lifted up by God. Do you remember what Howe said? “As a

result of this inclusion there was manifest on the face of the earth a power for living that cannot be measured.” I pray for you this power for living. Even more, I believe that God wills it for you.

Do you remember the words to that wonderful hymn,  
I will raise you up on eagle’s wings,  
Bear you on the breath of dawn,  
Make you to shine like the sun,  
And hold you in the palm of my hand.

May it be so for each of us. Amen