There was a young marine named Walter Anderson whose fingers were crushed in an accident. They were swollen and immobile for a few days. As the swelling went down, the doctor ran some tests to measure the extent of his injuries. The doctor said: "Try to move the first finger on your right hand." Walter tried but he could not move it. The doctor suggested that they wait another day and try again. But Walter's platoon sergeant was standing nearby, and he stepped forward. He looked at Walter and commanded loudly: "Move the first finger on your right hand now." And Walter moved that finger. I guess we can see who had the authority in that situation, and if was not the guy with the MD or DO behind his name.

In the Gospel reading we hear that the people were astonished and amazed because Jesus taught with authority and not as the scribes. What kind of authority is Jesus teaching with? Well, it is not the kind of authority that Walter's platoon sergeant had. Although Jesus certainly had the power to do that. After all, in the same Gospel passage, Jesus drove out the unclean spirit. Now we are not sure what happened there. The people at the time did not have the same understanding of mental illness that we have today. It may have been mental illness, or it may have been an evil spirit.   At that time, if someone acted inappropriately in the synagogue, they would immediately be removed. Jesus does not do that. Whether he cured the man's mental illness or drove out an unclean spirit, he definitely did it with authority. They certainly could have been astonished and amazed by this sign of Jesus' power, but they were astonished by his teaching before he did this.

So what did this mean, Jesus teaching with authority and not as the scribes? The people at the time would have been used to being taught by the scribes. These individuals would have been seen as experts in the law and interpreting the law. They reported the law to the people and told them what the experts said about the law. Jesus would not have been seen as an expert. He did not have formal education and he was from a poor family, so they would not have been impressed with his credentials. Jesus' authority did not come from his power to coerce; it came from his ability to inspire.

My guess is that Jesus taught in the synagogue the same way that he taught outside the synagogue. First of all, he taught in parables. He told stories that people could understand and relate to. And he used these parables to teach a moral or spiritual lesson. I think this is brilliant. Rather than just giving us the facts when he teaches in parables, we have to process the information and figure out the meaning. We have to process the information and internalize it. This learning is much different than just memorizing facts. When I was a kid I used to think: "Why doesn't Jesus just give us a list of exactly what to do and we could just do it. Love God and love one another. That is so vague. Why does he make us figure it out?" Now I understand that this is a spiritual journey and figuring it out is how we become the people that we are meant to be.

I also understand the power of storytelling. I think this is becoming much more recognized today. I frequently tell stories in my homilies because I realize that people remember and think about the stories. I am not sure if people remember anything else that I say, but people remember the stories. I have had people come up to me a year after I have given a homily and say: "What ever happened to Bob?" And my response is: "Who is Bob?" And they will say:

"You know, the Guy that…and tell me the whole story." I frequently change the names to protect the guilty, so you have to tell me the story for me to give you an update, but people always can. I think that is the most effective way that we can share our faith with other people is by storytelling. We need to teach as Jesus taught, not by coercion but by inspiring them. Do not just tell me the rules or the doctrine or the dogma. Tell me a story.