

Deuteronomy 18:15-22
I Corinthians 8: 1-13
Mark: 1: 21-28

New Teaching
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When I was in high school, it was the era of wearing buttons. This went beyond buttons for certain political candidates. I had buttons with the peace symbol on them, and buttons with quotes from Lord of the Rings in Elvish. These were markers of a certain kind of belonging, and my friends and I would admire them and share them. One said – do you remember this? – “Question Authority.” It was the same school of thought as the one that said, “Don’t trust anyone over 30.” So, even all these years later, my ears are attuned to the word authority when it turns up in Scripture.

Our passage from Deuteronomy is a promise about a prophet to come, in the future, one “who shall speak to them everything that God commands.” An authoritative prophet, who should be obeyed...so, if you can identify this person, you’re all set. Much of the drama in our Scriptures comes from the question of whether someone has authority, whether that someone is a prophet or a king or a teacher or an apostle. We can’t seem to agree about whom to follow. We can’t even agree about what makes a good leader.

I found a definition I liked recently. Bryan Franklin, an executive coach, defines leadership as “creating a future for others which wouldn’t have happened otherwise.” Let’s keep that definition in mind while we look at the Gospel reading, a description of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The Gospel writer Mark has already told us, in his own brief and terse style, about the baptism and desert temptation of Jesus, and the calling of four fisherman as followers. Then the content of the new prophet’s teaching is given, and it is called the Good News of God. He teaches: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.” This was the message, and in one way or another - in word, in parable, in action, in leadership, in authority – this was the ministry of Jesus. The Kingdom of God – a future for others that would not have happened otherwise – was very near, and Jesus’ task was to show us something of what it looked like.

The Kingdom of God - what was he talking about? It is interesting that the New Testament gives us no clear definition of that phrase – just sideways hints and parables. The biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan calls the Kingdom of God, “The Great Divine Clean-up of the World.” A new future created for others, in which God’s authority will be recognized and produce blessing and justice, and peace.

So, Jesus has been out on the road saying that the great divine clean-up has begun, and then “on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Jesus was authoritative about the Kingdom of God, not because he was smart, not because he had taken preaching classes, but because he was calling people into relationships they had not known existed. This was to be a participatory Kingdom. Jesus was not talking about head knowledge, but about heart knowledge. He called those listeners in the synagogue – and to others he met on other days of the week - to live into

the Kingdom, and that meant loving, not just with words, but with actions and through our social structures. This Kingdom needs to happen **through** human interaction, not just **to** human beings.

The Gospel of Mark starts all this off with a bang: with an exorcism in the synagogue, in fact. This is a sign that this is not business as usual. Something big is changing. Please, for a minute, put the movie “The Exorcist” and anything at all like it out of your mind. An “unclean spirit” was a first century description of someone in a kind of bondage, someone set apart by that bondage, which we can try to imagine but not pin down. Was it mental illness? Epilepsy? Addiction? A physical illness? Post Traumatic Stress Disorder? It does not matter, really. Jesus asserts more authority to break down boundaries and liberate a person from affliction. It is of one piece with his teaching: it is a parable of the Kingdom. Jesus did not expel an evil man from the synagogue; he expelled a destructive spirit from the man, and so welcomed the man back into community. He had the ability to see the person for who he was, and value him for who he was – a child of God – not for who he appeared to be- an evil, unclean person. In doing this, Jesus was teaching and healing the community of the synagogue. He was giving them all, the man and his neighbors, a future that would not have happened otherwise. There is a powerful synergy at work here: translating words into action, belief into action, teaching into action.

Of course this translation process can be difficult for many of us, and not just because we live 2000 years later and have a different culture and worldview. It is just the nature of the way that human societies work: we get snarled up about our goals and our methods. In the early church in Corinth, new Christians wrote letters to the Apostle Paul with concrete questions about how to follow Jesus and live into the Kingdom. They were having authority issues. Some people were claiming to be spiritual experts, and, by the way, making other people feel like spiritual idiots. The situation addressed in the reading today was about whether it was OK to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. If you went in to the market place of Corinth you could buy meat for the evening meal, just as we would go to Dan & Whit’s or the Coop today. But in Corinth, the butcher also worked for the local Roman or Greek temple. All butchering had religious meaning...and it was pagan meaning, not Christian. So here was the question: is it an insult to Christ to buy or consume meat that had been sacrificed to Zeus? Or, since Zeus didn’t really exist, was the sacrifice meaningless, and was it just another source of protein? With this question hanging over their heads, you can just imagine what the pot luck dinners in Corinth were like, with little 3x5 cards...”this casserole contains meat sacrificed to the emperor.” “This casserole is sacrifice-free.”

Paul says that he knows that the idols in the temple are not real, and so the meat sold from the sacrifice is not spiritually contaminated. But he also says that this knowledge does not give him the right to trample on the feelings of those who are still confused by all this. He would rather not eat meat: it is not worth the harm done to the community. His knowledge gives him freedom, but this is always conditioned by a responsibility to seek the greater good for others, by the demands of agape love. What matters is not being right, or smart, or perfect, but demonstrating the grace of interdependence. To Paul, this is the best use of authority, this is leadership: a compassionate awareness of difference, and a trust that God will reconcile a truly loving community. This was how he participated in "The Great Divine Clean-up of the World.”

If our church were to write a letter to the Apostle Paul, seeking his expert advice on some issue, it would probably not be about being carnivores or vegetarians. It is our responsibility to discern what conflict or separation needs to be overcome in our time, what exorcism of destructive forces that hinder our expression of the Kingdom of God. Remember, this is a participatory

Kingdom, one that God wills to happen through human interactions, one that calls us into relationships we had not known existed. Our Sabbath worship may need to be rudely interrupted with the cries of those outside the pale, struggling and in bondage, or bewildered in their attempts to live lives of honesty and integrity in the economic empires of our time.

Jesus taught a new teaching – with authority. It is not an easy teaching and we may be astounded at its implications and scope. Maybe the new teaching for us will take us out of our comfort zone, into questions of privilege and inequity and systems that keep poor people poor. Maybe this church will be a place where loving honesty can make possible and necessary conversations about our participation in unjust systems. Maybe the new teaching will take us beyond charity and compassionate service into the more troubling waters of accountable relationships. Maybe the new teaching will make leaders of us all, workers in the great divine clean-up of the world, creating a future for others which wouldn't have happened otherwise.

Jesus began his work with words and action, illustrations on a small scale of a huge endeavor. So I am offering a small gesture, a parable, if you will, to help us with the building up of loving community that began with Jesus and continued with Paul. In our attempts to be inclusive of all people in our worship, we have, for the last few years, offered a gluten-free option to the bread of holy communion: a few fragments from a gluten free loaf. When we celebrate the Eucharist in a little while, we will truly commune with one bread and it will be gluten-free bread. With our hearts and our hands and our senses, we will seek unity. We will follow the one who spoke with authority and gave us some good news. We do not need to stay divided. And may all our prayers and actions lead us to the Kingdom of God. Amen.