

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 28, 2018

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

Grace to you and peace...

I really do know better. But I blew it. Someone I know and trust posted on Facebook a political statement about our national budget. It matched with my point of view. So I shared it. Didn't check it for facts. Didn't verify. Just shared it.

It wasn't long before others that I know and respect called what I had posted into question. With background data and support. What I had shared was not true. But I shared it, thinking it had authority. And people who know and trust me...thinking perhaps that I have some kind of authority, also shared this incorrect information.

We are struggling as a nation these days – more than ever before, it seems – over what counts as authority. Who speaks and represents what is actually trustworthy? What is “Fake News” and what is true, and who has the authority to be trusted?

On Twitter a pastor posted a statement that he believes to be true. He asserted, with authority, “Do not be mistaken. The Bible is literal from cover to cover.” I suppose you can imagine the responses that engendered. “Peter was a rock.” “Jesus was a gate.” “I'm off to sell all my clothes, because the Bible literally says owning more than one shirt is a sin...” You get the picture. Several, of course, questioned, “Which translation?”

The prevalence of social media certainly complicates the question of who or what constitutes authority in our lives. It's become easier and easier to only read or listen to people whose opinions match and reinforce our own. It seems harder and harder to ascertain the truth – or even to agree on what constitutes truth. Even once-trusted (authoritative?) news outlets are pressured, by the 24-hour news cycle and the demand for profit, to promote sensationalism that attracts readers and subscribers.

Politicians perhaps once seemed to hold authority. At least once elected we were inclined to honor the authority inherent in the office, but no more. One of the rallying cries of the '60s was "question authority!" Today, who holds any authority at all? Scientists? Teachers? Police Officers? Clergy?

Without a doubt, all these are fallible at best. Where do we find authentic authority anymore?

In Hebrew scripture Moses held authority. Moses was the only person who could endure encountering the Living God and live to tell about it. Moses received the Divine Name from a burning bush, and the Commandments themselves directly from God. Moses was the intermediary between the Holiness of God and the chosen people.

Our first reading promises a continuation of Moses' authority:

"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I

will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.”

The authority of Moses would continue in the prophet that God promised to raise up. The only problem is we are told that we will know a prophet is true when what they have said actually comes to pass. It sounds like we might only know true authority in hindsight.

The gospel reading is all about authority. Jesus and the freshly called disciples entered the synagogue in Capernaum on the Sabbath and immediately Jesus began to teach. “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” It’s an interesting statement to make – that Jesus’ authoritative teaching was not like the teaching of the scribes. You see it was the responsibility of the scribes to teach in accordance with the authority of Moses.

At exactly that moment (immediately, in Mark’s language) there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. In the synagogue, the center of faithfulness and spiritual authority, authority itself is called into question. “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God,” cries out the spirit. When Jesus commands the unclean spirit to be silent and to come out of the man, the spirit cannot but obey. Again the people respond with amazement and awe. “What is this? A new teaching – with authority! Even the unclean spirits obey him.”

We’re still only in the first chapter of Mark’s gospel, but this exorcism story sets up the conflict that structures the first half of

the gospel. “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” is established as a cosmic conflict between the powers of evil and the powers of God that takes place in our earthly realm. The powers of evil, represented by Satan and the demons, stand in opposition to the power of God as revealed in the person and mission of Jesus, the one who declared “the reign of God is at hand.”

In the coming chapters we will see this cosmic conflict play out; in the struggle between Jesus and the unclean spirits; in the controversy between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees; and in the tension between Jesus and “his mother, sisters, and brothers.” The cosmic conflict has a very clear social/political dimension.

In a recent issue of The Christian Century magazine, Ismael Ruiz-Millan, from Duke Divinity School, tells a story from his experience in Tijuana, Mexico. He writes, “I approached a man in a park to ask if he wanted a meal. I introduced myself as a pastor.

“I killed several people just for fun,” he screamed at me, “and if I want to, I can kill you right now in front of all these people!”

As I think back to this encounter, I feel the shivers in my body again. After what felt like a long pause, I responded like this: “I don’t know why you did all that, but please know that God loves you, and because I have experienced God’s love in my own life, I can tell you that I love you too.”

This made him more upset. He started screaming in despair, “NO! No, that is not possible. I am a bad person; no one can love me!”

“Yes,” I said, “God loves you, and I love you.” Miraculously, the man’s demeanor changed drastically. He held my arms and then started to cry.

I asked if he would allow me to pray with him, and he consented. Did he have a specific concern or request? “Pray for my family. I have not seen them in years, and I don’t think I will see them again.” I prayed, and when I finished he left without a word.

Ruiz-Millan wonders if his experience with the man in Tijuana was anything like what Jesus experienced in Capernaum. Jesus spoke with an authority that was startling and surprising to the people in the synagogue. He spoke to the man with the unclean spirit with boldness and clarity. But more than that, Ruiz-Millan asserts, Jesus treated this man with compassion.

Jesus refused to ignore the man. He didn’t belittle him. He listened to what the unclean spirit had to say – in spite of its threat to Jesus’ own ministry – and, moved with compassion for the man entrapped by a power holding him captive; Jesus delivered the man from his oppression. It is Jesus’ healing compassion that restored the man to wholeness and community – that is the source of Jesus’ authority; the healing, compassionate, merciful authority that embodies the reign of God. No wonder Jesus’ fame began to spread throughout the region of Galilee.

Where do we find authority today? Do we look for authority from among those who hold the same opinions we hold? Do we give authority to our political party? Our employer? Our Alma Mater? Our favorite radio station? Our social network? Do we hold ourselves as our only authority?

Mark's gospel message is clear. The heavens have been torn open and the Holy Spirit is on the loose. The battle lines have been drawn and it is the powers of evil that have the most to lose in the face of God's compassionate reign of mercy. We will follow this story throughout this liturgical year and we are invited, challenged, *called* to find our highest authority in the person of Jesus Christ.

For years ISAI AH has tried to shape life in Minnesota for the common good by aligning itself with the politicians and the policies that had the most political power. Too often we have found ourselves disappointed by promises made by members of either party and abandoned for political expediency. We have tried to influence an authority that has a very different agenda. This year we are starting from a different authority. Listening carefully to the suffering and concerns of people all around the state, we have crafted an agenda that strives to reflect God's reign of inclusion and justice, of compassion and wholeness for everyone who lives here. Instead of responding to the authority of the established political powers we are seeking to model a third way, seeking to hold all candidates accountable to the authority of the people they represent. We are striving to act as though the authority of God's reign is truly close at hand.

Mark's gospel shows us how Jesus cared for those who are tormented and oppressed by evil, whether individual or systemic, and challenges us to confront it with the same kind of compassion Jesus demonstrated. The authority of compassionate, self-giving, love is an astounding thing indeed. Let's spread the word.

Amen.