

By Whose Authority?

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

January 29, 2012

United Memorial Church

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer, amen.

Some weeks I spend quite some time looking for just the right words to put on the sign.

Often I will 'Google' the central word of my theme for the week to see what sorts of quotes pop up.

The quote I chose this week was by a woman named Rita Mae Brown, a woman active in the Civil Rights movement and the early days of feminism.

Given that context, it's not surprising that she says, "I believe in a lively disrespect for most forms of authority."

Contrast that with another quote on authority, this tie from Pope Leo XIII, "The highest duty is to respect authority"

Two very different interpretations of authority!

One challenging authority, one respecting it.

One spoken from a culturally disempowered position, one from an empowered position.

What role does authority play in your life?

To whom do you grant authority?

When do you challenge authority?

When do you submit to it?

The same questions can be said about a community of faith.

When do we challenge authority and when do we submit to it?

Some say that the Bible is their ultimate authority... but I always like to ask, which part? ;-)

The part that says love God, and love your neighbour as yourself?

Or the part that says that women should remain silent in church?

I know that some days, some of you wish for the second one!

So the question is, how do we discern who really is speaking for God. Who really carries this authority? In the reading from Deuteronomy we get one idea. Moses is coming to the end of his time, and knows he will not enter the Promised Land. The Israelites want to know who will tell them what God wants, when Moses is gone. Moses tells them that “God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.”

But Moses isn't talking about one prophet, but a new prophet for each generation - the phrase is “raising up prophets.” who will continue to speak on God's behalf.

In today's world our guide is not Moses, but Jesus. Anyone who says they are speaking for God must be held up to the ministry and teachings of Jesus. (Rev. Fran Ota – Midrash January 29, 2012)

Prophets aren't comfortable people to have around. I don't think Jesus was a comfortable person to have around a lot of the time.

How would we respond to someone who came into our church, opened our scriptures and then began to teach in 'a new way?' It's hard to hear things that upset our preconceived ideas. Imagine sitting here on a Sunday morning and a guest preacher telling us, “YOU HAVE IT ALL WRONG!”

*Would you walk out of the church complimenting the preacher on a great sermon? If the teaching went contrary to what you had always been taught? Isn't that the LAST thing you would praise the preacher for? And yet, the gathered community in the synagogue does just that. Sometimes we know instinctively what is from God, regardless of common practice and habit. That gathered community understood that Jesus' authority does not come from being born into the *right* family. His authority does not come from attending the right schools or studying with the right people and earning the right degrees. Jesus' authority is granted by God, and is demonstrated through the many ways in which he works to make the Realm of God a reality throughout his ministry. Jesus is authoritative; but there is a difference between authoritative, and authoritarian. (Rev. Fran Ota – Midrash January 29, 2012)*

Most of you know and love Wilfred... some say that saying no to Wilfred is like saying no to God.

And while he holds some 'authority' as Clerk of Session, his authority doesn't come from a need or desire to get his own way.

You give him this authority because you know he is a man of God... a man who has a deep faith life, a man who follows the teachings of Jesus as best he knows how... and a man who always has the best interests of this community of faith at heart.

When he speaks, we listen, even if it not something we necessarily want to hear.

At a Conference Executive meeting in November, one of the members challenged the Conference's statement that we are to be involved in 'risk taking mission.'

He asked 'whose authority' made this so.

Our president, Rev. Jane Johnson, quietly asked, “Jesus?”

The man was silenced...

What do we need to turn over to Jesus' authority?

The enshrinement of the way things have always been done?

I attended a lecture at The Atlantic School of Theology last fall entitled The Urgency of Leadership – one of the things that I took away from that lecture was a phrase: Churches have a choice: deep change or slow death.

The cultural, social, political context has changed so much since this place was built.

We have a choice: deep change or slow death.

The Official Board and Trustees wrestled with a number of issues this past week, including the state of our finances.

I came home from the Board meeting energized and encouraged not just by the dedication from those who attended, but also by the enthusiasm and positivity expressed for our ministry and presence in the community.

We have some ideas and initiatives that we will roll out over the next number of weeks.

And we will be asking for your support and investment in those initiatives and ideas.

Are we willing to let go of the past and embrace the future?

Are we willing to grant authority to our leadership team in order to live out God's mission for us?

How will we know that this authority comes from God?

Bruce Epperly, a United Methodist minister, writes this, "Authority figures must be judged by their adherence to the "moral arc" of divine intentionality.

We must always ask the following questions: Does an authority figure promote justice, creativity, and beauty?

Does an authority figure seek what is truly best for the community, including honoring diverse opinions and lifestyles?

Does an authority figure enable people to be more creative, more adventurous, and more compassionate?"

When we can answer YES to those questions, we will know that the authority comes from God and not our own egos.

Thanks be to God for the discernment to exercise authority wisely, amen.

© Rev. Catherine MacDonald

This sermon was inspired by one written by Rev. Fran Ota, who is quoted in the text.

