

The Address of Sacred Authority

Deuteronomy 18: 14-20 Mark 1: 21-28

A young woman, likely a student from CF, comes to my window at the bank last week. She explains she left her pocketbook at home, has no card, no ID, nothing, but she has to get some things taken care of with her bank account. She asks what she can do.

I explained that I wouldn't be able to do anything for her unless she was able to provide some proof of being who she claims she is. She insisted that she was herself, and she needed to get things done. I tried explaining again that, for the safety of all of our customers and the security of their accounts, we have certain requirements for verifying that we're dealing with an authorized account holder when doing anything with an account. She persisted, and I persisted. She finally left in a huff because the unreasonable old man teller at the bank wouldn't give her access to her own money.

I also heard last week about a teller getting terminated for providing a substantial sum of cash to someone who was not authorized on an account. They managed to work out the mistake, but it cost the teller their job.

I try to bend over backwards for customers. Life doesn't always cooperate, and if something is missing or not quite in agreement with bank policy, I may look the other way and proceed – a judgment call in each case.

Other opportunities for proving yourself are not so forgiving. Forget your PIN code? Your debit card is useless. There's nothing you can do if you have no cash or no other card to make a purchase.

When I got my new phone, it has a fingerprint reader. I set it up, and then it wouldn't recognize my fingerprint. I couldn't access my brand new phone. The fingerprint reader was the only way in. I had to find out how to completely reset my phone to factory settings; that used to be fairly easy, but no longer. Then I ignored the new tech feature and set up a standard old PIN code, having been burned once on the whoop-tee-do fingerprint reader.

Authority means that you can do these things, get things done, make things happen. Authority is enabling; it's power. It can be used, and it can be abused. And authority – whether used properly or not – can expect to be challenged.

As Christians, we are people of a faith that was created by challenges to the existing authority. In fact, you can go back to the very first biblical story about humanity in relation to God – Adam and Eve – which is typically characterized as rebellion, but it's another way of describing a direct challenge to the authority of God. That experience didn't work out too well; God is not good with such challenges.

God is typically the one initiating all kinds of changes and challenges to existing authority and structures. Most Biblical stories and their heroes are about the servants

called by God to act on God's initiative in order to change and challenge the authority of that date and time.

That's what God's promise is in our first reading from Deuteronomy 18. Moses is speaking about how God promises to raise up a prophet of God's word and way who will be just like Moses. God promises to give them his word and commands so that the people of God listen and obey. There is a warning at the end: *But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.* Such false prophets either never had God's authority, or if they did have God's authority, they lose it.

At this point, the succession path from Moses to the next generation has yet to be defined. Authority then becomes the question for the next generation who will be expected to adhere to the covenant established at Mt. Sinai.

But there is more going on than that. Deuteronomy is a later work, coming during a religious reform period, probably at the time of King Josiah's sweeping reforms around 610 BCE. Religious reforms are another instance of authority being challenged. If we pay close attention to the text, we'll see what's being challenged.

That last verse about prophets 'speaking in the name of other gods, or presuming to speak words that God did not command' is not some generalization or random throwaway remark. Something very specific is being referred to, something inspired that remark, most likely something contemporary with the date of the text, not the history to which it refers.

It isn't exactly spelled out, but I would imagine it refers to abuses that had become common among the so-called court prophets or palace prophets. The openness of corrupt rulers to import foreign gods is well documented in scripture. These same corrupt, unscrupulous royals had no qualms about abusing and exploiting the house prophets in order to have the appearance of God's endorsement of policies, schemes, and various misadventures. We can easily imagine God being rather steamed at this usurpation of divine authority. Therefore, there is harsh punishment awaiting the fraudulent prophet who does not speak God's word, or with God's authority.

Then the question becomes, how will we know that a prophet **is** speaking with divine authority? The next verse says that the test is if the words of that prophet don't take place or come true, then that prophet is proven to have failed in speaking the word of God. The expectation is that God's will gets done. The true and worthy prophet of God provides God's word and expresses God's will and purpose.

Invariably, the prophet is calling God's people back to historic, sacred, and faithful foundations. The prophet's mission is God's challenge to worldly authority which has managed to replace God or manipulate God's promise so that the religious institution serves unworthy and unscrupulous purposes, not God's word and way. The prophet aims to bring the people back to true faithfulness in one sovereign God.

Finally, the prophet called by God typically stands apart from the religious, military, political, and cultural institutions that God's people expect to stand in authority, promulgating rules, standards, and practices that may have little to do with what God wants. The role of the prophet is as direct intermediary between God and God's people, bypassing the customary and accepted institutions so that God's word and way can be given unfettered witness by the one whom God has authorized.

Let's keep this image in mind as we turn to the story early in Mark's gospel of Jesus' first ministry activity while teaching in the Capernaum synagogue.

Jesus and his new disciples – freshly called from their fishing – go to the Capernaum synagogue, and Jesus is guest teaching. It says, *The people were amazed because [Jesus] taught as one who had authority, **not** as the teachers of the law.*

This is already reminiscent of the fraudulent prophets who failed to speak God's word in the passage from Deuteronomy. Here, it isn't prophets but teachers of the law who fail to speak "with authority," saying simply that God's word was not truly spoken.

We hear that Jesus *does* speak "with authority," *does* reveal God's word and way, and the people of God respond, like sheep to the shepherd's voice. This speaking is startling to the worshipers for at least two reasons. Let's be clear, the text never says what made Jesus so exceptional; it has to be reasonably inferred.

First, this is no typical teacher in their synagogue. Jesus is lower class, from the hinterland of Nazareth, and has no real schooling that they know of. He has no credentials, yet he speaks with such sacred authority.

Second, Jesus stands in contrast to typical teachers that worshipers encounter. Apparently, they say much that actually speaks to the yearning spirit of the people. Jesus says things that they don't ever hear. Judging from Jesus' teaching at other times, we expect a call to the devout to repent, to change direction in their lives as we discussed last week. We can expect him to teach about love, compassion, forgiveness, justice, and new life. These aren't niggling points of Torah-Law and practicing one's life in accord with legal interpretations. Jesus speaks about big subjects, big ideas with a vision for the Kingdom lifts up what is sacred, good, and true in Jewish law and tradition.

This new and authoritative voice doesn't go unnoticed. *Just then*, says Mark in his urgent voice, the voice of an unclean spirit spoke from a man in the congregation. *What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God!*

First, we can tell the unclean spirit is **not** alone in the synagogue since the unclean spirit talks about "us." Second, let's be clear that this is labeled "an **unclean** spirit," **not** "an **evil** spirit" that appears in other texts. Mark will refer to demons in other places, but it's noteworthy that here he doesn't describe them as "demons."

“Unclean spirit” means that it thrives in the failure to keep Torah-Law. It is ritually “unclean,” corrupt, or contaminated. It would seem that this man with an unclean spirit is present in that synagogue, and would seem to be there habitually. No one even notices that this man with an unclean spirit is there *until* the unclean spirit cries out, giving itself away. This outcry is provoked by Jesus’ teaching with authority about God’s true word and true way. Such teaching offends and disturbs the unclean spirit to the point that it cries out. It seems that the unclean spirit has never heard such teaching within the synagogue before. This story in the beginning Jesus’ ministry starts right off condemning the religious establishment that’s permeated with unclean spirits. Jesus, bearer of the sacred Spirit and authority of God, exorcizes – in effect, heals – God’s people of the false prophets, irrelevant teachers, and the unclean spirits who have received safe harbor within the religious establishment.

The unclean spirit is able to identify Jesus amid his teaching. Jesus didn’t walk into the synagogue with a halo; no halo, Jesus was nothing special, *until* he taught God’s word and way. Then there was no mistaking him; the unclean spirits knew who this was – the Holy One of God. The rest in the synagogue didn’t recognize Jesus as the Holy One of God, but as someone teaching with authority. Only the unclean spirit recognizes and identifies Jesus.

Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and commands it to come out of the man, which it did, shaking the man violently and emerging *with a shriek*.

This confirms to all that this teacher-of-the-day’s lesson was indeed special. *‘What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’* The expression “miracle” is **not** used. The focus is on teaching, and doing that with authority. As a result, the unclean spirits are forced obey him.

Jesus’ teaching was not compromised, half-baked rambling of those who try to claim sacred authority and yet show no evidence of knowing the heart and spirit of God. When Jesus taught, the people of God received a breath of fresh air, the heart of the Spirit of God. It was unmistakable.

God’s prophets don’t have a clear ID like a driver’s license, or the sacred PIN code to the Kingdom, but they will connect with God’s word and God’s way that seeks to advance the Kingdom of justice and righteousness, the values of love, compassion, mercy, peace, community, and new life. That’s their calling card.

If we haven’t put love, compassion, mercy, peace, community, and new life at the forefront of our lives, then we should hear when a prophet calls to us to repent, to change direction, acknowledging sacred authority challenging us. May we then turn to God’s new life promise in faithfulness and in witness to the Lord and his Kingdom.