

“How Do You Know Whom to Trust?”

Sermon for Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 29, 2012

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia

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Holy Scriptures: Deuteronomy 18: 15- 22 Mark 1: 21-28

Deuteronomy 18: 15- 22

A New Prophet Like Moses

15 The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ 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.”

17 Then the Lord replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ 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.”

21 You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?”²² If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

Mark 1: 21-28

The Man with an Unclean Spirit

21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught.²² They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,²⁴ and he cried out, “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.”²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “**Be silent, and come out of him!**”²⁶ And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”²⁸ At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Sermon

You may say to yourself,

“How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?” – Deut. 18: 22

They were all amazed,

and they kept on asking one another,

*“What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” –
Mark 1: 27a*

Like most young parents,

Martin Luther took great joy in his children.

One day when he was deeply upset by his church and political adversaries,

Martin Luther watched as his son Martin nursed in his mother's arms.

He remarked, *“Child, your enemies are the Pope, the Bishops,*

Duke George, Ferdinand, and the devil.

And there you are...unconcerned.”

As he observed his son's complete trust,

he realized his own anxiety was unwarranted.

God had promised to protect him, to love him, to be present, no matter what.

On another occasion,

Martin Luther came upon his 4 year old daughter Anasthasia.

Anasthasia was happily prattling away about Jesus Christ, angels and heaven.

Martin Luther said, *“My dear child, if only one could hold fast to this faith.”*

Anashtasia quickly replied, *“Why, Papa, don’t you believe it?”*

Luther was shocked.

He later reflected on the exchange

and wrote, *“Christ has made the children our teachers.”*

He could also have written that Christ has made those who love

and receive the word with the innocence and faith of a child our role models.

Not to take anything away from Martin Luther or his influence.

The truth is that you and I know very well what happens

when the Martin Luthers of the world,

the Scribes and Pharisees,
the priests and pastors and prophets,
and the whole people of God,
don't *really* believe the Good News
that they confess and profess, shout and spout,
preach and teach, acclaim and proclaim.

What happens is we know, we perceive, we intuit
that they do not speak with authority.

What happens is we are not so sure
we should trust their words or deeds or leadership.

What happens is the birth of distrust in religious institutions,
and the welcoming into the sanctuary
the forces and unclean spirits that oppose the
Gospel.

Lord, have mercy on us.

Send us one to teach us how to discern whom to trust and heed.

So it is no surprise and to all our benefit
that Jesus Christ walked into a house of worship
and turned it on its ear by teaching with authority.

The Bible speaks of the Sabbath that Jesus of Nazareth and his
followers

strolled into the synagogue in Capernaum.

Jesus began to teach.

His preaching unpacked the mysteries and messages of the Holy Scriptures,

and then he healed a man overcome with an unclean spirit.

The people who were there nudged one another

and commented that he spoke as one with authority,

and not like the scribes.

Clearly, this Jesus fellow is not like the scribes.

He was not like those who go through the motions,

nor like those who preach without joy or sincerity,

nor like those who speak without a convincing voice,

and especially not like those whose deeds do not match their words.

Here in the sanctuary -- *at last, thanks be to God!* --

was one whom the people of the congregation and the community could trust.

How do you know what voices to heed, to respect, to follow, to trust and obey?

Recently at a sporting event I saw a man wearing a bright orange t-shirt that said,

“I always do whatever the voices in my wife’s head tell me to do.”

You know, we smile but there is more truth here than we care to admit.

Folks are hearing odd voices and sounds,

strange directions, disturbing calls to action,

and many of us are unclear about what to do or whom to trust.

In the Bible, we are afforded an opportunity to observe love in action.

Jesus was teaching in the temple, and...

23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit,

24 and he cried out,

“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.”

²⁵ But Jesus rebuked him,
saying, *“Be silent, and come out of him!”*

26 And the unclean spirit,
convulsing him and crying with a loud voice,
came out of him.

The fact that the Gospel of Mark places this exorcism
in the midst of Jesus’ instructing about God
is to direct our undivided attention
on the power of His teaching.

In the Gospel of Mark,

the teaching power of the love of God “is connected with
miracles:

Jesus the teacher stills a storm, (4:38)

the teacher raises a dead girl, (5:35)

the teacher feeds the hungry crowd, (6:34)

the teacher cures an epileptic, (9:17)

and the teacher curses a fig tree
(11:21).” (Craddock, p. 142)

Are you starting to get the idea that Mark wants us to join him

in associating the teaching power of Jesus

with the power to heal, to resurrect, to feed the hungry, to transform?

There is a biblical, spiritual and ecclesial connection

between the sound of someone teaching with authority

and the results of human transformation.

Which brings us back around to the overlap of sound and trust.

How do you discern the sounds you hear?

Was that sound you heard

holy, from God, a divine gift from above and within?

Was that sound you heard

a blessing, a missive, a testament, a sigh too deep for words?

Was that sound you heard

a promise, a prayer, a proclamation, a prophecy?

Was that sound you heard

a word of preparation, affirmation, or confirmation?

Or was the sound only noise?

How can you tell the difference?

How do you discern whether the voices you hear are holy?

How do you know when the sounds you hear are holy,
whether the voice or voices you hear are helpful or hurtful?

Let's start with your favorite, most trusted Litmus Test.

My desktop dictionary defines a litmus test as:

1. A test for chemical acidity or basicity using litmus paper.
2. A test that uses a single indicator to prompt a decision.

I am blessed to be a member of a civic service club called Rotary International.

Rotarians draw deep upon the **The Four-Way Test**.

The Four Way Test, which has been translated into more than 100 languages,

asks the following questions:

Of the things we think, say or do

1. Is it the TRUTH?

2. Is it FAIR to all concerned?
3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?
4. Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Another positive Litmus Test is whether the voices you hear and are asked to heed

will direct your life to be harmful or hurtful.

For example, a surgeon must make an incision to operate,

and her craft leaves a scar and the necessity of painful therapy,

yet the hurt inflicted is a part of the healing.

On the other hand, a soul who is self-centered or selfish or self-righteous

may seek to intentionally harm others

for the sake of perpetuating a cause or idea.

Dare to ask whether at the core of the voice you hear,

will it lead you to heal or harm?

As people of faith we are invited to turn to the Holy Scriptures

for blessed guidance on how to discern the difference

between noise and voice,

between sounds and spiritual direction.

God, who loves you and knows your name and your needs, calls out to you.

You know God's voice because you know God.

Jesus says, "*My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.*"

The better we get to know God, to love God, to serve and follow God's ways,

the more clearly we will recognize God's voice.

God's voice is the movement and expression

of the Holy Spirit -- the Spirit of Love --

so we can affirm and confirm

that the voice of God

is the sound of love.

Love is the Litmus Test.

Allow me to encourage us to apply the Litmus Test of love

to those in our world today who proclaim that they hear the voice of God,

and tell us that they know exactly what you and I

should do

and how we should live and serve.

This week let's practice some holy listening

and see whether it makes a difference,

see whether we can tell who speaks with divine
authority,

see who has at heart the best interest of the
human condition.

Some Holy rollers tell us to prepare for the rapture, for the end of
days.

Some who call for a Holy Jihad advocate violence as a solution to
misunderstandings.

Some who call themselves holy prophets proclaim a gospel

that in no way reflects the God of love and forgiveness

I have personally encountered.

Our spiritual ancestors had the same concerns and questions.

In Deuteronomy 18, the Lord provided wise counsel

by putting God's own self in our shoes and addressing our
concerns:

²¹ You may say to yourself,

*“How can we recognize a word that the Lord has
not spoken?”*

22 If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord

but the thing does not take place or prove true,

it is a word that the Lord has not spoken.

The prophet has spoken it presumptuously;

do not be frightened by it. (Deuteronomy 18: 21-22)

In other words, do not fear and do not heed

prophetic words that are not grounded in love,

words whose results do not point to the nature and
nurture of God.

For example, the small, Topeka-based Westboro Baptist Church

may be protected by the Constitution of the United States

yet that does not mean their words or placards

which read “God Hates Gays” and “Jews
Killed Christ”

while they demonstrate at the funerals

of our servicemen and servicewomen

who gave the ultimate sacrifice

are in the remotest way holy.

Hateful words and prejudiced opinions are never holy,

nor do they speak a prophetic or pastoral word

for, to, or on behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Here in the south we like to say that *“love is blind, but the neighbors aren’t.”*

We see what is really going on.

And if we don’t, if we misread a detail, if we mistake the holiness in our midst,

trust that those whom you trust will get it.

Trust that those who truly, deeply love you

will share and be the Good News for you.

Sometimes we need to heed the insights and observations

of those whom we do trust,

those who have our best interest at heart,

those who care and listen,

those who are connected to the holy,

those who know and follow
the Good Shepherd,

those who discern the difference between noise and the voice of God.

Maybe we could expand our southern expression

from love is blind

to love is deaf, but the neighbor's aren't.

Connecting to the holy voice of God

will make you a better person and build a better world.

Integrate into your daily life the steady drumbeat of God's Word.

The Lamb of God trusts the confirming Word of the Lord, who is our Shepherd,

"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:

he leadeth me beside the still waters."

(Psalm 23: 1-2)

The Lord will provide.

The providential care of the Lord starts with the Word.

The Lord provides a Word

that can sound so much like rolling thunder,

like the laughter of a child,

like the pause between the notes,

like the steady breathing of your
beloved,

like the cries for freedom and
justice

from the oppressed,

like a still, small voice
whispering in your ear.

A new teaching – with authority.

Yes, you heard that.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!