

January 31, 2021

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

<sup>15</sup>The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. <sup>16</sup>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.” <sup>17</sup>Then the Lord replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. <sup>20</sup>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.”

I Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup>Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; <sup>3</sup>but anyone who loves God is known by God. <sup>4</sup>Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” <sup>5</sup>Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – <sup>6</sup>yet for us there is one God, the Creator, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. <sup>7</sup>It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. <sup>8</sup>“Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. <sup>9</sup>But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup>For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup>So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. <sup>12</sup>But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin

against Christ. <sup>13</sup>Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Mark 1:21-28

<sup>21</sup>They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, [Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught. <sup>22</sup>They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. <sup>23</sup>Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, <sup>24</sup>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.” <sup>25</sup>But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” <sup>26</sup>And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. <sup>27</sup>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.” <sup>28</sup>At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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In the last ten years there has been an upsurge of religious fervor in the United States, as well as other parts of the world, known as fundamentalism. It is a movement to conserve religious traditions; a movement that purports a “back to basics” doctrine. I understand this movements’ feelings – to a degree. It’s adherers are looking for answers to the unanswered questions of life.

As political turmoil and insurgence came on the scene in the 1960’s, many of the “liberal” denominations became involved in social movements with a social agenda. This movement attempted to establish the Kingdom of God here on earth through social action and equal justice for all. Unfortunately the churches’ activism of the sixties and seventies did not herald in the Kingdom of God. In fact, it brought with it more unanswered questions about our faith, than it did answers. In a time where the poor keep getting poorer and unemployment is rising, many people are looking for answers, not more unanswerable questions.

The “back to basics” fundamentalism is a reaction to the activism of the sixties. It is giving answers to every aspect of life. Definite, concrete, and unchanging answers. This is why the fundamental churches in this country and abroad are growing. You are no longer required to think or take responsibility for decisions; those things are

being taken care of for you. You just have to believe, accept the answers given.

This sermon is not an attack on the members of fundamentalist churches. What I have said up until now is laying ground work for what I believe the three scripture passages this morning can tell us.

The fundamentalist theologians are basing their answers to the various faith questions believers have on a literalistic interpretation of the Bible. That is, if something is not written word for word in the Bible, it cannot be true. As important as I find the Bible to be, this use of the Bible leads to a form of legalism that the Apostle Paul condemns. It is a fine, but important line that separates an understanding of the Bible as God's revelation and the Bible as a legal document. The Bible is an aid that helps us to understand and to perceive God acting in our world today; it is an aid to help us understand how God wants us to act in our world today; and, thirdly, the Bible is an aid to help us speak about God with authority.

Speaking about God with authority is something many people claim to be able to do. Shirley McClain and the New Age speak about God with authority: They are Gods, you are God, everyone is God. The TV preachers talk about God with authority: God the judge – the one who shakes a moral finger at all the things and people outside of the law and codex of morals of these preachers.

In the Old Testament it was the prophets, who spoke about God with authority. The prophetic office had long been a tradition. From Samuel, who advised the tribes of Israel until they wanted a king, through Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the many other prophets. It was not until late in the history of Israel (around 600 B.C.) that the prophets became a scripturally recognized office within the religion. The first legal recognition we have of prophets having an official function in the religion is in the passage that was read this morning from Deuteronomy. Moses is explaining to the people of Israel that God will send among them one who "shall speak to them, all that" God commands. We learn in this passage that it was the desire of the people of Israel to have someone mediate between God and the people of God, because they feared the nearness of God. In verse 16 we read: the people said, "Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire anymore, lest I die." The writer of Deuteronomy is telling us that the people of Israel feared speaking with God, so some were to be chosen by God or elected by the

people or born into the office of prophecy that God's words be made known through them.

What makes this passage so interesting is more what is implied than what is written. The people of Israel already had the ten commandments, which Moses had given them. They had the laws of God. They knew the rules about what they could or could not eat or wear. They knew the restrictions regarding relationships in the family and community. They knew the proper form of worship. Everything was written down and preserved. They already had, so to speak, their own Bible. So why did they need a prophet to speak to them the words of God?

The people of Israel knew that while in some things there is nothing new under the sun, their lives, their worldviews were constantly changing. The laws of God, as they understood them, had to be constantly reinterpreted. It was and is the role of the prophets to critically examine and proclaim anew the words of God.

I am giving you all this history, because speaking about God with authority means more than just reading from the Bible literally. The Old Testament text today clearly proves, what one Bible commentary said: "devout and enlightened criticism has more ancient precedent and more historical rootings than has the fundamentalism of our day. Actually ... biblical literalism is a recent and poorly endorsed phenomenon ..." Knowing this though the author of the commentary concludes with "this is no license for irresponsibility." That means, the Bible is still an important document, but it needs to be used properly, critically.

Having heard these words in Deuteronomy, the question the people of Israel had was, how does one recognize a true prophet? Our question today is similar: How does one recognize someone who speaks of God with authority, especially if Biblical literalism is not a criteria?

The scripture lesson from Mark's Gospel give us some insight into the answer to this question. Jesus walked into the synagogue on the sabbath and taught. Mark reports: "They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority ..." That is not surprising to us. For we believe that God revealed God's self in the person of Jesus. We believe that Jesus spoke about God with authority, because Jesus was God's chosen one.

The logical answer then to the question, how does one recognize someone who speaks with authority about God is: one speaks with authority about God, when one speaks as Jesus spoke.

That doesn't really solve the problem though. How do we know who speaks as Jesus spoke? There is no easy answer to this question either. We do know though that Jesus' authority was quickly recognized by those who were against that authority. Mark records that Jesus was recognized by an unclean spirit, which spoke: "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." It is still true today that those, who speak of God, and our responsibility to God, meet with this same kind of challenge: "Have you come to destroy us?"

The gospel of Jesus Christ turns the world upside down. It preaches that we are to have love for those who hate us; it teaches that the weak and lowly are this world's true inheritors; it teaches that God loves all creation – a love that forgives, accepts, and supports. For those of this world who are more interested in their own gain, than they are of listening to and living by God's word, this gospel of love is threatening; they too ask: "Have you come to destroy us?" We only have to look at people like Martin Luther King to see how people become threatened by God's words and God's prophets.

The Bible is an important tool, then, in helping us to examine the words that we hear around us, to see if these words are a part of God's continuing revelation. The Bible records eyewitness accounts of Jesus and his ministry. We must critically examine these accounts and try to understand the spirit and the faith in which they were recorded. Then, perhaps, we will come a little closer to understanding God's words in our lives.

There is still a question to be answered: Who speaks with authority about God today? The answer to this question is implied in the third scripture lesson for today. Paul write to the church at Corinth reminding them that they have a responsibility to those around them; a responsibility to edify, buildup. Paul says that even when they know eating certain foods does not interfere in or change their relationship to God, some believers in Jesus still do think that food offered to idols is tainted or magical. Paul, then, is warning those, who know that these foods are not destructive to their relationship with God, to be careful about what they eat and where they eat it.

Some of the new and maybe weaker members of the faith may think that by eating food offered to idols, they would be able to change their relationship to God.

The children's message this morning tried to make this passage clearer. The law concerning the crossing of a street is there to protect both drivers and pedestrians. When we are old enough to see there is no danger, we can (maybe shouldn't, but can) cross against the light. We should always check not only for on-coming cars, but little children as well. If we don't some small child, not knowing the danger, may cross against the light at a later, and maybe fatal, time.

In this passage from I Corinthians the answer to the question of who can speak with authority about God is implied. For the Old Testament writers the authoritative speakers were the prophets. The reason being that the "common" people were too scared of God to talk with and listen to God. The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals to us a God of love and forgiveness, a God that comes to us and dwells among us, a God we need not fear to listen to, rather to whom we are compelled to listen to. The answer to the question of who speaks with authority about God is: All Christians. Not just me or ministers, rather all Christians.

How do we speak? Paul and Jesus imply we do so with our lives. How we live affects not only ourselves, but all those around us and to some extent all of creation. Speaking with authority about God implies living the gospel of Jesus Christ, living by the example Jesus set for us.

This example can be seen in the Bible. So it is important that we know the Bible. But we must be careful about using the Bible as a book of law, as a measurement for judging others. The answers to life's problems that my fundamentalist brothers and sisters are giving, answers taken literally out of the Bible, are most often not God's prophetic words. Just quoting scripture passages out of the Bible is not speaking with authority about God. Otherwise the office of prophecy would not have been necessary to establish, as it was in the book of Deuteronomy.

True speech about God occurs in our living by the example of Jesus, who spoke with authority. The example of Jesus is to be found in the Bible, living this example is speaking with authority about God. Amen.