

“A New Teaching”

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

*And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying,*

*“What is this? A new teaching!*

*With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”*

Mark 1:27 [RSV]

Let us pray... O God,

We are grateful for our traditions handed down through the centuries.

We are also grateful that you are still speaking and teaching us in new ways  
to respond to the challenges of our time.

Help us to be discerning of your Word

to listen and hear your message for us of loving-kindness, justice, and peace.

Amen

Have you ever heard this?

‘But we have always done it this way...’

Have you ever said it yourself – or just-to-yourself?

I think we all have felt that way even if we didn’t actually say it.

Generally, nobody wants to be stuck in a boring routine,  
or in something that just doesn’t work.

On the other hand, there is something comfortable about predictability –  
or simply not having to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

We want to trust that we’ll get reliable service, for example –

like getting what we ordered from a restaurant menu,

or getting the same clothes back, cleaned & pressed from a dry cleaners.

Then there’s the wisdom of “Fiddler on The Roof” –

‘It’s a tradition!’

Often, we just don’t want to change, because we don’t want confrontation.

So, we rationalize and compromise ourselves to adapt to a new ‘normal’.

Regarding pastoral ministry, there are different attitudes about  
what is meant by ‘tradition’ in a church.

For example, there is the *priestly* role in which ministers are expected

to perform as functionaries for the rituals of marriage, baptism,

ordination, funerals, & pastoral duties of visiting those who are infirm.

Another example is the *prophetic* role, through which the Good News is proclaimed  
from the pulpit, Sunday to Sunday.

But the prophetic role can also mean

*comforting the afflicted... and afflicting the comfortable –*

not only in the pews, but out in the street, two by two’s.

Willard, p.2

There are consequences for misusing the privilege

to speak prophetically in the name of God, as it is written in Deut. 18:20<sup>b</sup>:  
*But if I haven't spoken, and a prophet claims to have a message from me,  
you must kill that prophet,  
and you must also kill any prophet who claims to have a message  
from another god.*

That brings into question about how someone knows they are talking to God,  
and what God is speaking – or... still speaking to us.

It was a big jump – a ‘new teaching’ in 2004

when our national office challenged UCC congregations to adopt  
‘Don't put a period where God has put a comma. God is still speaking’,  
as our new denominational mission message.

A ‘comma’ was introduced, competing – to some extent,

with the traditional UCC emblem of cross and crown and worldly orb.

It was a bigger jump the next year at the 2005 UCC General Synod in Atlanta

when congregations were challenged to support legislation for gay marriage.

Many UCC churches limited or withdrew financial support for the national offices

and some even left the denomination, or were ‘steepjacked’ by conservatives.

The United Church of Christ is still recovering –

even as society itself changed to legalize gay marriage.

For this reason, I believe we are the “Church of the future” – that is...

if our churches can survive! There is a cost to speaking truth to power...

In the Gospel of John chapter 6, Jesus spoke of ‘bread from heaven’

to crowds that had followed him after being fed by 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish.

They had been among the 5,000 and now were seeking another... free meal,

but were dismayed when Jesus described his body & blood as spiritual food.

As they turned away and dispersed, Jesus turned to his 12 disciples, and asked,

“Will you also go away?”

Even the 12 didn't quite get it, and that was Jesus' greatest fear,

even more than physical danger.

In effect, would Jesus have to suffer persecution and death for nothing?

Will they get it? In many ways that question is still with us.

In our Gospel lesson from Mark 1 today, Jesus enters a synagogue

and is confronted by a man possessed with an evil spirit.

This unclean spirit cries out, saying,

‘What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?’

which is what the Legion of demons say to Jesus later on in Mark 5,

‘What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?’

It is as if they are saying,

“We were doing just fine here, Jesus, Son of God – until you showed up!”

Willard, p.3

This summer during my sabbatical,

I learned 'a new teaching' from theologian Dominic Crossan who said he wondered why demonic possession is only mentioned in the Christian 'New Testament' – and not in the Hebrew "Old Testament".

He thinks this is because demonic possession serves as a metaphor for the effects of Roman occupation on an oppressed people.

Another 'new teaching' for me was from a book by theologian Howard Thurman who described how fear, deception, and hatred work on both the oppressor and the oppressed.

He was talking about the Romans and the Judeans of Jesus' day as well as the politics of institutional racism in modern American society – and that the only way to drive out these evil spirits was by the Holy Spirit of love.

So, this Gospel lesson of Jesus driving out an evil spirit in a synagogue, suggests that even religious institutions can get co-opted by unhealthy spirits – especially political attitudes.

That is basically the wisdom underlying why our founding ancestors endorsed a separation of Church and State.

Proclamations in the name of God carry the weight of truth and authority – which can be an unfair advantage in public discourse on social issues.

That unfair advantage can be a very bad thing when that authority is used to justify or ignore bad behavior.

That unfair advantage can also be a very good thing when challenging society to do the right thing.

Think of the spirit of division within churches during the 1960s with opposition to the Vietnam War and the struggle for Civil Rights.

Does that apply these days given current events? What do you think?

For us as Christians & all people of goodwill, the litmus test for doing the right thing is the Law of Love – the Holy Spirit of Rational Loving-kindness that guides us to become a Beloved Community characterized by justice & peace.

I will close by asking you to consider a practical exercise for spiritual discernment about the issue ... of immigration, using a poem by Brian Bilston entitled, "*Refugees*"...

Willard, p.4

*They have no need of our help/  
So do not tell me*

*These haggard faces could belong to you or me  
Should life have dealt a different hand/  
We need to see them for who they really are*

*Chancers [Schemers] and scroungers  
Layabouts [Vagrants] and loungers  
With bombs up their sleeves*

*Cut-throats and thieves/  
They are not  
Welcome here/  
We should make them*

*Go back where they came from/  
They cannot  
Share our food  
Share our homes*

*Share our countries/  
Instead let us  
Build a wall to keep them out/  
It is not okay to say*

*These are people just like us/  
A place should only belong to those who are born there/  
Do not be so stupid to think that  
The world can be looked at another way*

(Now read from bottom to top.)

Willard, p.5

*The world can be looked at another way/  
Do not be so stupid to think that  
A place should only belong to those who are born there/  
These are people just like us/  
It is not okay to say  
Build a wall to keep them out/  
Instead let us  
Share our countries  
Share our homes  
Share our food/  
They cannot  
Go back where they came from/  
We should make them  
Welcome here/  
They are not  
Cut-throats and thieves  
With bombs up their sleeves  
Layabouts [Vagrants] and loungers  
Chancers [Schemers] and scroungers/  
We need to see them for who they really are  
Should life have dealt a different hand/  
These haggard faces could belong to you or me/  
So do not tell me  
They have no need of our help*

Does this apply these days given current events? What do you think?

Remember the choice is yours...

Amen

*Our lesson today from Deuteronomy 18:15-20*

*as found in the Common English Version, is about the people's need for  
someone to be their trusted intermediary with God  
who will faithfully proclaim and interpret God's Word to them,  
and that there will be consequences for misrepresenting God...*

*[Moses said,]*

15 ...[God] will choose one of your own people to be a prophet just like me,  
and you must do what that prophet says.

16 You were asking for a prophet the day you were gathered at Mount Sinai  
and said to the LORD,

“Please don't let us hear your voice or see this terrible fire again—  
if we do, we will die!”

17 Then the LORD told me:

Moses,

they have said the right thing.

18 So when I want to speak to them,

I will choose one of them to be a prophet like you.

I will give my message to that prophet,

who will tell the people exactly what I have said.

19 Since the message comes from me,

anyone who doesn't obey the message will have to answer to me.

20 But if I haven't spoken, and a prophet claims to have a message from me,  
you must kill that prophet,

and you must also kill any prophet who claims to have a message  
from another god.

*Let us be challenged and guided by these words...*

Mark 1:21-28

- <sup>21</sup> And they went into Caper'na-um; and immediately on the Sabbath  
[Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught.
- <sup>22</sup> And they were astonished at his teaching,  
for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.
- <sup>23</sup> And immediately 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> And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying,  
“What is this? A new teaching!  
With authority he commands even the unclean spirits,  
and they obey him.”
- <sup>28</sup> And at once his fame spread everywhere  
throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.