



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

A NEW TEACHING

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 1, 2015

Readings (Revised Common Lectionary year B): Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1

Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Sermon text: "What is this? A new teaching-- with authority!" Mark 1:26

The first reading gives me pause, as a preacher who generally prefaces his sermons with "In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Here is Moses passing on a warning from God: "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" (Deuteronomy 18:20).

Fortunately, we have guests this morning from two other churches in our diocese, the Church of the Atonement in the Bronx and Christ Church/San Marcos in Tarrytown. So I hope one of these two fellow priests will pick up and carry on if I make a fatal exegetical move. Consider taking a different interpretative tack on the text though, perhaps preaching on a verse from the psalm we read: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10).

I am making light of the threat but my point this morning is serious. Differences of interpretation of the will and word of God often lead to serious conflict. In the most extreme case, extremists will kill to defend their version of divine truth. Witness, of course, the current wave of violent Islamist extremism—recently in Paris, horrifying in Peshawar school, and visited on our shores on 9/11 (I was forcefully and emotionally reminded of that time by a visit to the 9/11 memorial and

Museum last weekend when I was in NY for a conference). Violent extremism is not however somehow intrinsic to the revelation claimed by the prophet Mohammed (who lived to old age, by the way). There have many centuries of relatively peaceful Islamic interpretation and governance: I am thinking especially of sufi spirituality, which seeks an inner light and union with the divine, and the brief but shining era of “*convivencia*” in which Muslims, Christians and Jews living together in Moorish Spain shared scholarship, art and theology in a high moment for western civilization.¹ This may be contrasted with the following age of Spanish rule, in which the conquering reign of Christian Ferdinand and Isabel expelled not only the Muslims by way but the Jews and dissident Christians through the infamous Inquisition. So interpretive tolerance is something to reach for and hold on to in every civilization—and we fought 100 years of religious wars in the aftermath of the Reformation to secure it in the Christian West.

Interestingly, interpretive tolerance, at least within a spectrum, is something intrinsic to the tradition of rabbinic Judaism, which grew out of the Pharisaic Judaism. The Pharisaic “scribes and lawyers” of the New Testament, whom Jesus vigorously debated (see Jesus on sabbath observance, for instance) were the ancestors of the rabbis and sages of the Mishnah and Talmud. In those works, the basic form of teaching is an extended debate over the interpretation of the Torah, the Law of Moses. One rabbi will claim this, another that. The House of Rabbi Hillel will be in this corner and Beth Shammai in another: roughly, a loose versus strict interpretation of the Law. Yet, somewhere in the Talmud it is said, the houses of Hillel and Shammai both teach the word of God.

This is perhaps why Paul, who was trained under the famous rabbi Gamaliel, and who was certainly no slouch in opposing folks who with whom he disagreed, yet offers a good deal of latitude in regard to specific practices within the developing Christian community of Corinth on such matters as food sacrificed to idols or practices of marriage and celibacy. Some Christians are more advanced than others, he admits—some realize there are no other gods but God—and so who cares if meat offered and sacrificed at the Temple (where the priests then took a cut) makes it way to the market and then your table (the farm to Temple to table movement). But others do not have this ‘knowledge’—they think it a scandal to eat meat sacrificed to an idol. Should the more knowledgeable treat their scruples with disdain? No, he writes. Be careful that your knowledge does harm their faith. For “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Let us remember that verse. It may be that fear—in the sense of the Hebrew word so translated, which is really akin to respect and worship—is the beginning of wisdom. We should respect and worship God, realizing God is God and we are but mortals.

¹ La Convivencia (“the Coexistence”) is a name that is sometimes given to the period of Spanish history from the Muslim Umayyad conquest of the Iberian peninsula in the early eighth century until the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Any picture of a long peaceful coexistence of Muslim, Christian and Jew is exaggerated and historically dubious, but under the reign of And al-Rahman III, 912-961, self-proclaimed Prince of All Believers,” a remarkable flowering of philosophy, theology and art did occur, a synthesis which led to the 12th century Summas of Thomas Aquinas. There are moments in history we can hold up as shining examples to emulate—and this was one.

But God has revealed a new teaching as well, to one and through one who was far more than just a prophet. Jesus was just starting out in his new ministry after being baptized by John. He returned home and unrolled the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue of Capernaum. He not only repeated the words of the prophet about the good news being brought to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, he also said that this prophecy was fulfilled in their presence. Quite a claim. And then, in Mark's version of that inaugural sermon, a man possessed by a demon challenged him. "What do you have to do with is, Jesus of nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who are, the Holy One of God!"

"Silence"—Jesus said—and he commanded the spirit to leave. All were amazed. "What is this? a new teaching—with authority!" How could Jesus Jesus claim the authority to proclaim his coming to be the fulfillment of the scripture, to exercise not only the power to heal but the authority to forgive? What gave him the right to rule about what is permitted on the sabbath (Jesus decided by his actions that it was right, not just permissible, to heal). It was not only the demonic forces of this world which sensed, rightly, that Jesus was the Holy One of God come to destroy them. Those who exercised the authority to interpret the scriptures also recognized a threat. The defenders of the religious status quo cooperated with the threatened princes and principalities of this world, as well as the dark forces aligned with them, to destroy Jesus before he destroyed them. But the Holy One of God was not to be silenced or thrown out of history. Far from it. His resurrection reclaimed his authority—now there could be no doubt about who he was among his followers—he was the Son of God. His is the authoritative teaching on scripture and the word of God—or so we believe who call ourselves Christians, disciples of Christ.

And what is his teaching, what is the beginning and the end, the alpha and omega of his prophetic and more than prophetic word? God is love, and that is, if not the beginning of wisdom, certainly its end. We are to trust in God as Father, Creator, and in Christ as Savior and to put away fear of human powers and follow in the power of the Holy Spirit. May we, as we try to listen to the Word and follow the will of God, also learn to listen with tolerance and celebrate together with believers of all religions, and of none, considering that all people of good will are trying in their own way to follow the law of love. This is the new teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. And his authority was earned on the cross, where he died rather than kill others. Let us resolve to follow—with courage, joy and faith. For love goes, life is sure to follow.

In Christ's name, Amen.

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