

Weekly Reading – Monday, January 26, 2009

Our focus here are the appointed lessons for Sunday, February 1 (aka Groundhog Day Eve), the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany. The ministry of Jesus continues, with a text from Deuteronomy on the nature of the prophet's ministry as background. Also continuing is the epistle journey through the mid-part of I Corinthians where gospel freedom and community fellowship are at stake.

Deuteronomy 18: 15 - 20

Remember that Deuteronomy is an extended sermonic reflection/ exhortation of Moses addressing the Hebrews as they stand at the border of the Promised Land ready to pass over to a new life and chapter, one in which Moses will not accompany them. So Deuteronomy is like last words and reminders from the great lawgiver and leader. Here Moses understands his role as the first of the prophets (messenger of God) and promises that God will raise up a new prophet for the people's guidance. But how will they know who is a true or real prophet of God and who is not? That continues to be, in those words or slightly different variations, a very current and urgent question. How do we know the genuine article among preachers and leaders? How can we tell if someone is delivering a truthful and trustworthy word from the Lord or not? So what does this passage tell us about such discernment? First, the Lord shall not leave us without someone to speak on his behalf. God will not be without a witness, with messengers of his word. Second, in verse 15 Moses says the prophet will be "like me" and "from among your own people." That is to say the person will have roots and relationship in the community. He is not a Lone Ranger riding in from nowhere. The prophet office being what it is, a certain prophetic loneliness may ensue, but the prophet is neither a Lone Ranger nor a Super Hero but "from among your own people." The true prophet's agenda is to bear God's word to God's people, so discernment means asking, "Which master does this prophet serve?" Some prophet's curry favor with earthly masters, and some look to feather their own nest. True prophets serve the Lord, which as Jesus says, is more than simply saying "Lord, Lord." In the end, vs. 21 - 22, the test is "Does a prophet's announced word come to pass or not?" If not, the prophet has spoken presumptuously; "do not be frightened by it." Well, that's only partial help. Sometimes we can't wait around to see what happens or until the votes are all in or the Fat Lady sings. Which leaves us with an unavoidable aspect of being human, the absence of complete certainty.

I Corinthians 8: 1 - 13

At first glance and to those unfamiliar with it (including many of those who hear it read on Sunday morning) this lesson will seem pretty useless and irrelevant. Trust me, it's not. But it is one that requires a careful distinction of the "now of then," the presenting issue then; followed by a move, by dynamic analogy, to "the now of now." The now of then issue was food, meat really, that had been "offered to idols," butchered and blessed in temples of various Greco-Roman deities. And the issue velcros onto what is going on in the Corinthian church, namely serious factionalism, whereby some are claiming great knowledge and spiritual insight, while suggesting others are "not getting it." As he begins, Paul quotes those in the congregation who view themselves as the "enlightened" and "in the know." "All of us,"

they say, "possess knowledge." We get it. We understand there aren't really any other gods, there is one God revealed in Christ, and thus we are free to eat the meat that has been processed over them at the Temple of Zeus butcher shop and smoke house. Note Paul's immediate caution to the "enlightened," "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Two kinds of spirituality here (this can be connected back to the previous lesson on true and false prophets). One kind makes me big and significant because I get it and have the truth. The other kind of spirituality isn't about me, but is about building up the Body, the community, and a concern for others, particularly the "weak" and the vulnerable. Paul tells the enlightened, also referred to as "the strong," that they are right on the issue of theology, but wrong on the matter of ethics and ecclesiology. "Take care that this liberty of yours does not become a stumbling block" to a weaker brother or sister. Sometimes this argument has been overused as parents and pastors have asked children, teens, or church people to overly constrict their behavior for fear of upsetting anyone. But there is a wonderful, and in the American context of hyper-individualism, a powerful point. For Christians, personal enlightenment is second to community health and growth. A theology of "we" not "me." For contemporary analogies, use of alcohol is a obvious one. A good challenge for a preacher and congregation to explore and come up with other analogies in our time and context to the one of eating meat offered to idols. Military service? Working in the gaming industry? But a central point looms large, being right is not enough; being in relationship matters.

Mark 1: 21 - 28

Everything moves along quickly in Mark. After the clipped call of the first disciples, we are in Capernaum on the Sabbath and Jesus goes into the synagogue to teach. It is there he encounters a demon or demonic spirit. Ponder that. We sometimes think the demonic or unclean will be out in precincts conventionally assigned to such, while "church" will be the refuge of good people. Guess not. Sometimes it is under the veneer or cover of holiness that the demonic shelters. Beware those who shine too brightly, whose virtue is too lustrous, and who are unaware of their own dark side or shadow (cf. "those who possess knowledge" in I Corinthians lesson). The interesting thing about this text is the way a teaching story is wrapped around an exorcism story. The middle verses, 23 - 26, contain Jesus' rebuke of the unclean spirit and an exorcism. Then we return to the theme with which we began in verse 21, teaching, in 27 -28. Moreover, the people's response to the exorcism is couched in terms of Jesus as teacher. "What is this? A new teaching--with authority!" The teaching and healing work of Christ are of a piece. They add up to transformation, to life change. Sometimes that a far cry from the way we think of teaching or the way teachers teach. Too often teaching, which has in many ways faded altogether in the mainline churches, is at best a presentation of some interesting ideas you might consider or want to think about should you have time. There's little urgency or claim that something of ultimate nature is at stake. The way Mark ties teaching and exorcism together suggests something different. That with Christian teaching there is something at stake. Is there in your preaching or in the preaching of your minister a sense of urgency? Is there a sense that something ultimate or significant is at stake? Too many churches seem to be going through the motions and have forgotten the power of God's word to heal, to guide, to sustain, and to make new. This lesson, in harness with Deuteronomy and I Corinthians, reminds us of that power. The word of God is the source of our life and vitality. I wonder if some preachers/ ministers under the impress of

systems theory and its teaching about non-anxious presence have mistaken urgency for anxiety and tossed out the baby with the bath water? Anxiety does disable, but a sense of urgency helps us to come alive and grow.