

Faith Mennonite Church  
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**Leading with Authority**  
*Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28*

*And [Jesus] said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." - Matthew 13:52*

Today is the day of our annual congregational business meeting. One of the things we will do today is affirm a slate of persons who will serve as members of commissions and committees, and guide the work of our church council. We are a church of many leaders, leaders called out from and affirmed by the congregation through our gifts discernment process. Yet we sometimes have a tendency to demur; accepting the name of leader may feel a bit daunting. And rightly so; accepting a leadership role comes with expectations and it carries authority.

If we are hesitant to be called a leader, we may be even more hesitant to admit to having authority. In the church, as well as in society, that word carries a lot of baggage. Our minds quickly go to "hierarchical authority" or "abuse of authority." We want to distance ourselves as far as possible from the negative associations.

But in today's gospel reading, the disciples and the listening crowds are awe-struck by Jesus' authority. It is an attractive authority. It is an authority that uses power for the good of others, not oneself. It is an authority that cuts through legalisms, the "oughts" and "should" and religious expectations, and moves to heart of a matter in speaking the truth. It is an authority that sees, identifies, and boldly confronts and casts out the spirit of evil that is harming an individual and by extension the whole community.

This is an authority for which people hunger and wish to follow. Indeed, the verses that immediately precede this passage is that of Jesus calling his first disciples. No doubt it was his attractive authority that made the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John, drop their nets and follow this new teacher and healer, Jesus.

The Old Testament text this morning speaks of the role of a prophet in the community. These words in Deuteronomy are written in a voice that anticipates the settling of the people of Israel in the land, following their wilderness sojourn. Moses is assuring the people that other prophets will follow when he is no longer with them.

Prophets and the role of speaking a prophetic word are very much tied to the question of authority. On the one hand there is a word of assurance: God will always raise up and provide prophets, those who will illuminate and speak the necessary words of truth for a people. But there is also a word of warning: this is not a role to be taken lightly. The role of prophet, like the exercise of authority, requires discernment and a deep commitment and connection with the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ. The words of Deuteronomy warn that someone who carelessly speaks in the name of other gods will encounter judgment.

How do we discern the validity of a prophet and of one who exercises authority among us? The Deuteronomy passage says that the prophet will be raised up from among the people. The prophet isn't just someone who shows up and then moves along, or whose audience is via the airwaves or entirely virtual. The prophet is known and knows the community into which he or she speaks. This is local; this is contextual.

The prophet and the one who leads with authority will be recognized by how well their words and actions align with the prophetic tradition and with Jesus' exercise of authority. What was the message of God's prophets of old: Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Zachariah, Zephaniah, Isaiah, Joel and Jeremiah? What was the message of Jesus? They critiqued the false gods that tempted the people—the gods of material security, of military might, of affluence, of injustice—the failure to care for the least and the weakest in the community. Yes, the prophets always brought a word of comfort and hope, but only after they confronted the waywardness or at least the temptations that pulled for the loyalty of God's people.

Twice in the past week I've heard references to the fact that we're often like fish: we fail to recognize the cultural water in which we swim. The water in which we swim is filled with the seduction of material comfort, of "protecting the middle class." It is filled with the subtle and not so subtle violence of individual gun rights, our country's foreign policy and the favorite sport that many of us will watch this evening(!) It is filled with individualism in society, coupled with a fundamentalism within the church, that says "my way or the highway," and fails to listen carefully to the other.

This is the stream in which we are swimming. And I have heard more than one of you say that one of the things our weekly gathering for worship does for you is remind you of *who* you are and *whose* you are, as a follower of Christ, as you swim and navigate this stream the other six days of the week.

And so I invite you all, those who are leading us on commissions and committees, in worship and in singing, in our education classes, and in small groups: help us to see and name the things that can so easily become false gods for us. Help us to confess and turn away when we get side-tracked. Call us to clarity in hearing the voice of God, in listening for the whisper of the Spirit of Christ calling us to the work of reconciliation, calling us toward the pain that Christ the healer wishes to touch.

When the crowds heard Jesus preach in the synagogue in Capernaum they were awe-struck. "He teaches as one with authority, not like the scribes." The scribes get a bum rap in much of the gospel writings. They often get paired with the Pharisees, as in "Scribes and Pharisees" and Jesus often had choice words for them.

But the scribes played an important role: they were the members of the community tasked with that arduous, thankless job of keep the records (like our treasurer), making sure that the established laws and traditions were passed from one generation to the next. What did Jesus do that was different? What about his teaching was authoritative?

We find a clue in the gospel of Matthew, on one occasion when Jesus spoke *positively* of the scribes. In chapter 13, verse 52 he said: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

Ah ... what is *new* and what is *old*. Jesus was recognized to have authority because he was able to hold the old and the new together. He spoke the old words in new ways. He didn't throw out the past, the tradition. Neither did he utter newness that looked nothing like the past. He brought the past to life in the here and now of his followers in ways that were liberating, truthful, life-giving, and life-surrendering.

The oldest person in attendance at the Pastors Week that I attended at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary earlier this week was 96-year-old retired pastor and missionary Chester Wenger. He is the father of AMBS president Sara Wenger Shenk. He is the author of the "Letter to the Church" that went viral last fall, a letter in which he shared his decision to perform the wedding ceremony of his son who legally married his gay partner of more than 20 years. Those of you who read that letter will recall how he honored the old and the new, embedding his action within the totality of his life of ministry.

This is a challenging time in the larger Mennonite Church. Discerning the old and the new is never an easy task. It's made all the more difficult because of our geographic separation and distance and the many influences in the larger religious culture. It looks to some of us that some parts of the church are holding too tightly to the old. While they, no doubt, look at others of us as being uncritically accepting of the new.

I believe the witness of our congregation, albeit imperfect, has been one of trying to hold together the old and the new. This isn't easy. It requires us to study and understand the biblical story and the received tradition—the old. Only when these are written on our hearts, so that we live and breathe them, *and* we seek the guidance of the Spirit in our community discernment, can we speak and act with authority that we have found the new. That we have found that which is liberating, truthful, life-giving, and life-surrendering.

The good news is the table set before us this morning. Leading with authority, speaking a prophetic word, comes to us as a gift of grace. Jesus invites us, like the fishermen, to travel with and be led by his spirit. We need not be perfect, nor aim for perfection, nor feel shame when we mess things up. Jesus died for us out of love, pure love. It is that love we celebrate at this table. It is that love that we receive in bread and cup to sustain us as we swim upstream against a strong current. Let us gather, eat, and drink in gratitude.