

“Prophecy and Polity”

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So, there have already been quite a few presidential primary debates – the Republican candidates squaring off against each other. You may be intrigued, or you may be tired of them already, or paying no attention at all – but it’s a presidential election year and the debates and ads aren’t going anywhere – they’re here to stay – and now you can also track how often the election makes its way into sermon illustrations. But I was thinking: you know how they do the “fact-check” features on what the candidates say? After a debate, there will be an analysis of what was said and if it was accurate or misleading or downright wrong...that’s done sometimes for the political ads as well; and I saw such an analysis done on Obama’s state of the union address too. Well, what if this feature was added to the “fact-check” process: if what a candidate says is not true, then they are given the death penalty? If you are inaccurate, that is a capital offense, so you are sent to death row – right there – on the spot. Do you think that would influence the content of the debates at all? Make things a bit more truthful? I think it would...truthfulness would suddenly become very important. Or more likely, there wouldn’t be any debates at all. Of course, I am not actually serious about this idea – in this anxious world of ours I don’t want to be misquoted about the death penalty for presidential candidates! This is just preacher’s license to make a point.

And what it’s meant to point to is the scripture we read today – the stunning, disturbing passage from Deuteronomy that says basically this: Israel needs a successor to Moses – needs a great prophet to follow in Moses’ formidable footsteps; and the LORD *will* do that, so you better listen to whoever it is; BUT – if someone claims to be a prophet who isn’t – someone says: ‘this is God’s word’ but it really isn’t...then that prophet will DIE. That’s quite a scenario! A promise that God’s word *does/will* speak through a prophet – that’s life; but then a warning for

would-be prophets to beware: claim to speak for God at your own risk – that’s death. A matter of life and death. So with that scenario made clear, anyone here today want to claim to be a prophet? Willing to risk it? Anyone want to claim they have the word of God today?

Well, how about the Apostle Paul? Paul is never one to be shy about proclaiming the word of God, and never seems at a loss for words or for confidence. The letters Paul writes to the early church could be summarized something like: Paul says it – you better believe it – that settles it. Here are a few things Paul knows: there is one God; idols are just make-believe; and if you eat some food from the so-called idol tents, it’s just food – it’s no big deal. It’s nice to be able to be sophisticated, mature in faith – to know the truth so you aren’t controlled by superstition and ignorance – it’s good to be Paul. Which kind of sounds like what I might expect from Paul. I tend to think of him as somewhat superior, even self-aggrandizing. Except that then, Paul says something remarkable: he says ‘anyone who claims to know anything, knows nothing...for example: if I, Paul, am so sure about the absurdity of idols, but someone else isn’t, and then my enlightened dining choices cause someone else’s faith to falter, then I am the one who has the problem...better no meat for me than no faith for my sisters and brothers.’ Really? The theological truth Paul knows is less important than the fragile faith of those around him. It is fascinating – beautiful, even – what Paul says – but difficult too! So you have to calculate expressing anything you know based on how it might/could/maybe trip up others? Well that being the case, can anyone ever say anything? Isn’t too risky? Based on the standard that you have to be sure not to offend anyone – does anyone want to claim they have the word of God today?

Well, how about Jesus? How about Jesus Christ the Son of God the Eternal Word made flesh? Jesus seems like a good candidate at least, right? – to be a prophet; to have knowledge; to be able to say something...? And in the story from

Mark, that is indeed what we find. Jesus enters the synagogue and teaches – it says ‘he taught as one who has authority’ (with a little sideswipe comment: not like the scribes! who were the theologians of the day); ‘they were astounded at his teaching’, it says. And then this:

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 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.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

The people are even more amazed: ‘a new teaching with authority...’ Jesus’ fame spreads like wildfire. Anyone want to claim that Jesus speaks the word of God then – and today?

Well that is our claim – that this teacher, this prophet, Jesus is the word of God for us and for this world. And what might this intense brief story say to us about that – about his authority, his word, his power? In Mark it’s the first we hear of Jesus teaching and healing, so this would seem to be setting the tone. I wonder about this: that the core of what Jesus is about is making broken people whole; about cleansing into good what has been corrupted; about silencing death and speaking life. Jesus’ authority is over what binds this person in brokenness: the Spirit of life putting the spirit of death on notice.

Jesus speaks with authority. What might that mean for us, seeking and speaking the word of God today? Deuteronomy cautions us that God’s word is not to be taken lightly: it is the lifeblood of God’s people – but to hijack God’s word is deadly – to the speaker and hearer. While Corinthians cautions us that in a community, discerning God’s word is complex and fraught with consequences – it has to do not just with truth but with relationships. And in the midst of that challenge, what the word of Jesus – Jesus the Word – speaks to us with authority is

this: the struggle for good is never against each other or against another, it is a struggle against the spiritual brokenness of this world; our purpose is not to be right and others wrong, but to face brokenness with healing. Our authority is only what Jesus gives us: a truth that heals.

That says a lot to our words. It says to be bold and prophetic, because this broken world needs a healing word; AND it says to be humble, careful, to listen and discern. It says this – that when spiritual people, us included, use our faith to tear down people, then NO! – that is not the word of God; when spiritual people, including us, claim knowledge that leads to hurting others, then NO! – that is not the word of God.

In Corinthians, Paul has this profound word: ‘anyone who loves God is known by God’ – which is to say, here’s the only thing we really know: that God knows us – and that we respond in love. To know we belong to God, and to seek to live in love to God, that is how Jesus the living Word lives in and through us. Be prophets to this broken world, because of love; stand up to evil, because of love; listen to others, because of love; speak life to death, because of love; speak against injustice, because of love; don’t be afraid to be right and don’t be afraid to be wrong, because of love; act boldly to heal, because of love. That is the authority Jesus gives to us and speaks through us. That is the word of the Lord – thanks be to God. Amen