

January 28, 2024
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A Church Gathers for its Annual Meeting

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses said: The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 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."

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 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. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Today is the day of the Annual Meeting of this parish. At first and last glance there is nothing overwhelming exciting and earth shattering about this event – beyond the rush behind the scenes right after Christmas and New Years to get everything together. But at least 35 of us need to gather close to 11:15 to receive reports and budgets and hold elections.

I've presided at roughly 30 of such meetings over the years. Early on as a young rector, my greatest fear was getting tripped up by an obscure parliamentary procedure of Robert's Rules of Order. I would even dream about the possibility of someone moving to table a motion, or question whether a quorum was in fact present, or whether someone could vote by proxy, or who was really in charge of keeping the list of church members eligible to vote. Clearly these are not questions or concerns that Jesus wrestled with when he gathered some fisherfolk and said: "follow me."

The background of my early pre-Annual Meeting jitters was that nagging self-doubt that enters many of our minds when we are green and unsure: who put us in charge? And do we

really know what we are doing? Imposter syndrome may be the official self-diagnosis. Who and what gives one the authority to do what one is called or paid to do?

Looking at today's readings, I would not be the first one to notice that they have a lot to say about authority and legitimacy.

In the passage from Deuteronomy, we find ourselves in that formative period after the Exodus from Egypt when the great leader and prophet Moses is with the Israelites in the wilderness and receives the Ten Commandments. Moses had long since proven that he was no imposter: he was as legitimate and powerful as they come. And read how he would not be the last: God imagined other prophets to come in the future.

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command." God continues: "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." A prophet is legitimate and has authority when God gives voice.

In the second reading, what were the people in Corinth fighting about? Whether new Christians could eat food that had been sacrificed to idols at pagan shrines.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

8Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge."

This makes emerging conflicts around current concerns about organic, cage-free, naturally sourced and non-GMO food seem tame in comparison.

What is so interesting in this passage is how Paul is guiding the community to avoid misusing knowledge as a way to exclude, shame and blame. This happened then and it happens today. Who has ever been with someone who carries themselves as the smartest person in the room? It can be hard to get in a word edgewise or offer a contrarian point of view.

There is barely a week that goes by without hearing another report about the rise and risk of A.I. -- artificial intelligence. Even the Congress is getting involved with the surge of so-called deepfakes – when AI is used to make an image of someone using their face or body – meaning that you can't always be sure what you are looking at is really what you are looking at. This is especially risky as we enter a presidential election year.

Welcome to our brave new world!

It may be the just the right time to remember Paul's keen observation: Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. 2? Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; 3but anyone who loves God is known by him."

What Paul cared most about was the quality of relationship within that growing community. He warns them about using any authority or knowledge to lord over others.

13Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

Not even Jesus was given a free pass on whether or not he was the real deal or not. What did we hear just two weeks ago: Nathaniel's quip to Philip about Jesus -- "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

In today's gospel we see Jesus entering a synagogue. It was clear that he was teaching with authority to the point that even the unclean spirit in control of a poor man recognized the power he possessed: "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."

The new teaching that Jesus brought was not about puffed-up knowledge or expertise but about the desire for God to make us whole. To know where we are hurting and finding a way to mend and heal. God knows when we are anxious and worried: find a moment and a space to breathe and trust and remain open.

To most people on this beautiful earth, the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is nothing new. The gospel has been brought to every corner of the world and translated into countless languages. People have come to faith through the power of this message of love that builds up.

This past week a number of us went to see a movie inspired by the ministry of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. It premiered in over 1000 theatres for this one-day event. The movie is: A Case for Love.

The premise and the need for the project: "Our society is more divided than ever. Many have moved into tribal corners, seeing the world from an "us versus them" point of view. The documentary examines the question of whether or not love, specifically—unselfish—love, is the solution to the extreme societal and political divide facing the world. It highlights 14 stories of "ordinary people doing ordinary-to-extraordinary things." What has flowed out the film is a "A MONTH OF UNSELFISH LOVE" CHALLENGE. For 30 days people across the country will perform daily acts of selflessness and journaling their moments. At a time when many are shaking their heads and wondering if there is anything we can do to change the path we are on, it just might be that tapping into this love that builds up that the apostle Paul was trying to tell the Corinthians about.

I have been known to answer a prospective member's question of what it takes to join this church – i.e., what paperwork is involved. I am quick to share my take. This is what it means to call this parish your spiritual and church home: Do you come, do you care, do you give. Do you come to church enough that someone knows your face and name – or wants to know your name? Today we are rolling out the first photo directly in more than twelve years that will greatly help in that work. Many thanks go out to Kim Billings and Jen Murray

who spent months herding cats – I mean gently inviting people to get their pictures taken in our chapel. Do you care? Do you care enough about what is going on to read or open up an eNews, attend a meeting, service on a committee, venture over to Coffee Hour, or be one of the true worker bees behind the scenes that make it everything come together on a Sunday morning. Do you give? We are stewards of all that God has given us: this earth, our lives, our families and friendships, our health, and the people we meet along the journey.

My take on the culture of this place is that we'd rather spend more time worshipping and being together than we would listening to urgent pleas for money to support the church. In most years, because so many do give of themselves and donate financially to this ministry, we can keep that promise. We stay in the generous lane of stewardship of all that we have given without needing to transact business every week. For that I would like to say thank you. Thank you for being able to enter the year on a sound financial ground so that we can put energy into gathering, serving, healing, learning and deepening our faith. And I do not want to take this for granted.

When there were those early Annual Meetings when I was less sure of what I was doing, I leaned into my seminary training. One piece of wisdom I've carried with me ever since.

In our first year, we had time with the dean of the seminary by the name of Jim Finhagen, a wonderful man and had written many books on pastoral ministry. We sat at his feet and absorbed what we could of his vast experience in the church. His main task was to form the gathered eclectic group in front of him so that they/we could one day be ordained leaders. He cautioned us to not allow ourselves to be put on pedestals by the people we serve. He said being elevated would give only a false sense of authority and security. He would also say with a smile: the higher up people put you, the easier it might be for them to kick that box you stand on from under your feet. So, stay grounded and connected. He also said that priests are not ordained to be special or be set apart. The church ordains some to be set within a community. Set within to do certain tasks like preach, teach, bless, absolve sins, and call people around the altar and then preside at the Eucharist. After all someone has to do those things, it is works best when it happens surrounded by fellow pilgrims working their way through a life of faith.

I have been set within Christ Church in Exeter for the last eleven years. Together we have renovated our meeting spaces to bring them up to code and accessible and bright for us and the wider community. We house an amazing children and youth theatre program that provides such a needed space to learn and grown. Together we improvised our way through what I hope will be the only global Pandemic in our lifetimes. We baptize our children and bury our loved ones.

We are here.

Psalm 111: 1 Hallelujah!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, *
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.