

TEXT: Lectionary
THEME: A new teaching - with authority
SUBJECT: Discernment
TITLE: Holy War

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
28 January 2018
Messiah Moravian
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Conflict between Jesus and the Scribes erupts the first time Jesus teaches in a synagogue and continues throughout his ministry ending in his death, the fate of a false prophet. The Scribes and Pharisees, as Mark tells the story, are the custodians of precedent and tradition. Their job is to interpret the word of God given in the law and the prophets. They interpret the present moment in light of the past.

Jesus teaches a new word for a new day, one not bound by precedent and tradition. Jesus reads the present moment, not in light of the past, but in light of the coming kingdom of God. The present moment is seen from the perspective of a hoped for future.

The clash between tradition maintained by an ordained priesthood and a new word spoken by a charismatic teacher with authority, the clash between interpreting the present in light of the past and interpreting the present in light of the coming kingdom of God, is what Mark means by a holy war.

The demon possessed man is a symbolic representation of this clash. The unclean spirit challenges Jesus' authority and Jesus silences it. The convulsive hatred of those who oppose the new teaching does not invalidate the good news of Jesus' message. The violent response testifies to the force of the shock wave registered in the defenders of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Whether it is broke or not depends on where you sit in the social order. Yet, we need to acknowledge that the new is not always good news. Sometimes the new is not holy, but a perversion of the good, the true, the beautiful. So. How do we know when we are to trust a new teaching as a word from God, and when we should keep calm and carry on?

For four years the Faith and Order Commission of the Moravian Church debated whether the church should ordain people with a same sex orientation. When it came time to vote, we went around the table, each person declaring his/her position along with a rationale for their vote. One person said, "I see no evidence that warrants a change of the precedent and tradition of the church's teaching on this subject."

That position prevailed in 1995. Recently, the Northern Province of the Moravian Church in America voted to ordain LGBT candidates. The Southern Province does not, and the Northern Province has been put on "probation" by Unity Synod, the ultimate authority in matters of faith and doctrine for the Moravian Church worldwide.

This clash is not unique to the Moravian Church. The United Methodist Church, many thoughtful observers believe, is headed for schism. The Episcopal Church in the US is

on the outs with worldwide Anglican Communion. In 2010 the ELCA ordained gay clergy; the Presbyterian Church in 2011.

Underlying this fight over ordaining or marrying LGBTQ people is a clash over authority. Who gets to decide if the new teaching is a word from God or a word from an unclean spirit? For the Roman Catholic Church it is ultimately the Pope. For churches in the tradition of the Reformation, it is the Bible, our paper Pope. But interpreted by whom?

Truth be told, when it comes to religious authority, most Americans today are like Sheila Larson, a nurse immersed in a therapeutic culture, who said: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's 'Sheilaism.' Just my own little voice."

While few of us would call our faith by our names, we prefer the authority of our own little voices. This suggests the logical possibility of over 330 million American religions, one for each of us. When Anne Hutchinson began to draw her own theological conclusions and teach them to others, conclusions that differed from those of the established authority, she was tried and banished from Massachusetts in 1637. Today, Anne Hutchinson is the norm.

One has to ask, "How do we live together in any kind of harmony, how do we have any notion of a common good, if each of us heeds our individual voices as the ultimate authority?" I don't know about you, but I know there is more than one little voice in my head and these little voices offer conflicting guidance. The holy war rages, not just between us, but within us as well.

The Psalmist declares the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Fear of the Lord involves openness to listening to voices other than our own. Our theological perspectives are best gained, crafted and sustained by faithful participation in the worshipping life of the community, by listening to the voices of the prophets and sages and saints, and especially to the voice of the One who teaches new things - with authority.

Jesus told his disciples that he would not be able to teach them all they needed to know while he was with them. Therefore, God will send the Holy Spirit who will teach you everything. To think everything we need to know has already been revealed is to make an idol of tradition, of the past. Only a community of faith guided by the Holy Spirit serves a living God.

Paul offers additional guidance. Claims to absolute knowledge are suspect because we see through a glass darkly, our knowledge is partial. Claims to know fully are arrogant, signs of an inflated ego that believes our little voice is the voice of God. The antidote to this arrogance is a love that respects all members of the community.

Thomas Merton warns us that many of our most cherished claims to know God's will are only our inordinate passions in disguise. The proof of this is found in the excitement they produce. The God of peace is never glorified by violence.

LGBTQ people have suffered much violence at the hands of those who have claimed absolute knowledge of the word and will of God. Such violence stands as evidence against their claims.

If we insist on the present moment being bound by precedent and tradition, by the teaching of church councils, Popes, Unity Synods, the Bible itself, we will continue to deny the humanity of many of our brothers and sisters.

If we believe, however, in the "God of relentless change" who gives us the Holy Spirit to teach what we need to know for our day, then the present remains open, filled with hope for the coming kingdom of God.

The clash between the creative power of love and life and the destructive power of hatred and death is a holy war we cannot afford to lose.