

Deuteronomy 18:15-22New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

A New Prophet Like Moses

¹⁵The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet^[a] like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.^[b] ¹⁶This 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." ¹⁷Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet^[c] like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet,^[d] who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet^[e] shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰But 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." ²¹You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?" ²²If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

Mark 1:21-28New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Man with an Unclean Spirit

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and 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." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He^[a] commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

The Power of Teaching with Authority

Mark 1:21-28; Deuteronomy 18:15-22

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Kerra Becker English

How do you determine authority and authenticity in religious teaching? That's an important question for our time that leads to a whole host of other questions. Who gets to speak for God? Anyone? Everyone? The religiously trained? The divinely inspired? The doctrinally pure? Only Christian voices? Or what about hate-filled voices that claim Christian beliefs, do they get to claim authority just because they believe in Jesus? And for those of us who are listening, how do we filter the information we get from those who claim to be teachers of the faith in ways that help us in our own spiritual growth?

It's a big undertaking to try to figure this out. And it's something I've tried to explain as one who occasionally has to defend my own credentials for being a teacher of the faith. Why should anyone listen to me, or to anyone else for that matter? Up until now, I've never felt like I achieved a completely satisfactory answer to that question. I may not be any closer to a real answer today, but I think I'm beginning to get a better handle on why it's so difficult. It's difficult because, in the American cultural landscape in particular, religion has become completely associated with belief. Religious people are asked what they BELIEVE about Jesus. Do you *believe* he is the Son of God? Do you *believe* that he was resurrected from the dead? Do you *believe* that he saved you from your sins? Or religious people are asked what they BELIEVE about who God is. Is God loving or vengeful? Is God active in current events, or did God create the world and lean back to watch it all unfold? It seems like all we ever ask about religion is what people believe. I think it's what has created contemporary atheism. Do you believe in God,

or not? Is the divine presence real, or just a made-up fantasy? And those who lean toward saying that God is only real if you can prove it are just as much stuck in this understanding of belief as the religious benchmark as those who claim that holding Christian beliefs is the only way to get to heaven.

So when we start determining who has religious authority based on who has the right beliefs and who doesn't, we get ourselves into a predicament. Beliefs can't be easily measured. Beliefs change over time and depending on circumstances. "Because I said so" has never been a good way to determine if a teacher's knowledge is trustworthy. Have you ever felt it a worthwhile venture to argue with someone about their beliefs? I'd be interested to hear about it if it was helpful because I've never found it to be so. Religious traditions struggle with the shifting sand of beliefs. There are always those who want to keep the old ways of thinking and those who want to move the tradition forward. Traditions that are based solely on what people believed a hundred years ago or even 20 years ago won't make sense in our current context. And yet, we who understand ourselves as believers want to take our sacred writings and our deep history seriously – even when the interpretations of those writings and the movements of history change over time. In fact, what makes these ancient writings hold their value as sacred may be the flexibility they show as they are interpreted over time. Therefore, whether you love this idea or not, we are constantly living in the in-between, the now and not yet of what actually constitutes authoritative or authentic teaching when it comes to what we believe.

But the interesting thing is this, as we consult the Bible and begin to look at these two texts that talk precisely about authority and authenticity when it comes to speaking on God's behalf, they aren't really talking about what people believe or don't believe at all. They are talking about something else. Want to know about authority? Watch to see if the prophet's words

come to pass. Want to know about authenticity? Observe how people react to Jesus' teaching as compared to the scribes. Want to know if a spiritual leader is really in tune with God? Check up on whether good or evil follows in their wake. Words are great – but if you want to know more about who to trust to teach you about faith – look at your teacher's actions.

Moses and Jesus were both looked to for teaching beliefs – it's true. The Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount are still go-to guides for understanding the moral tenets that lead to a faithful life. But they don't mean much without understanding who these spiritual leaders were and what they expected of themselves and what they looked for in others. To let people know what kind of prophets God will raise up in the future, Moses asks his listeners to watch for their words come to fruition. If a prophet speaks in the name of God, but misses the mark, then obviously, they weren't speaking on behalf of God, or at least they misheard parts of what God was speaking to them. In the story in Mark, it's not only Jesus' charisma that holds the attention of his listeners, though there is that. His teaching is more dynamic than that of the scribes. But he also calls out the extremism in the man with the unclean spirit, and the spirit that speaks of destruction obeys him. Therefore, the man with the unclean spirit is freed from his possession, a possession we might call something like delusion or deception, and the evil that had been holding him hostage could no longer keep control. Evil is vanquished. And now that's what religious authority looks like.

It would be good for us to remember these stories when we are looking to those who would teach us more about our faith. Who do we trust? The ones who can quote long passages of Karl Barth or the rock star preacher with rock-solid beliefs? The ones who have reached the fame and fortune of speaking to large audiences in massive auditoriums? The ones with book deals or private jets? The ones who say one thing but then do another? The Bible speaks to us of false

prophets and charlatan teachers of the faith. That we still have those folks around should not surprise us in the least. So, when we are looking to build up our faith, Moses and Jesus, who I hold up as pretty good examples for us, tell us to look for whether the teachers' words hold up as true and whether or not goodness follows them. Their actions, their practices, their humility will always tell you much about who they really are. Then if you notice that the unclean spirits are encouraged rather than banished, I'd say you have a false teacher on your hands!

True teachers of the faith come in all kinds of packages. I hope you recognize that. Some are indeed called and trained as clergy, but a lot of them are not. My spiritual teachers have been hairdressers and nurses, professors and business owners. They have been friends and colleagues. They have been "every Sunday" kinds of Christians, my second "church" of friends in Tennessee who didn't go to any church, and my delightful friend who is a suburban rabbi. If I collected all their beliefs about things, there would be no way, no way to categorize it or make it all make sense in some sort of systematic theology. And yet, all of these wise, wise people have been ones who speak truth about God's love and who make it a priority every day to make the world a better place. I am astounded at these teachers of faith, for they teach, NO, they live their lives, as those who have authority and authenticity about them. I hope and pray that in even little ways, I can do the same. Amen.

In Imitation of God _ Richard Rohr _ Center for Action and Contemplation

Tuesday, January 23, 2018

Theologian and New Testament scholar Marcus Borg (1942-2015) significantly contributed to our new understanding of Jesus in his historical and cultural context. Today I'd like to share Borg's insights on how Jesus pursued the imitatio dei (imitation of God) as his life's purpose. This is the best any of us can do: to act as God acts (see Ephesians 5:1). But first we must be clear about how God acts, which is why we need good theology. Borg writes:

The central imperative in the teaching of Jesus is to live in accord with God's character: "Be compassionate, as God is compassionate." . . . We are to feel for others as God feels for all of God's children and act accordingly. . . .