

St. John's Episcopal church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany  
1 February 2015

Scripture readings:

Deuteronomy 18:15-20      Psalm 111      I Corinthians 8:1-13      Mark 1:21-28

I'm fascinated by the Gospel text for today and I hope you are too. Here is Jesus in the synagogue and we don't know what he said and there is no theological argument given to us to chew on in this text. "*He entered the synagogue and taught, and they were astounded at his teaching.*" We're not told what he said but we *are* told how he said it. "*He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*" What might that mean?

I always feel bad for scribes and Pharisees. I always think they get the short end of the stick - or whatever end your stick has - because they were darn good religious people. They invested a lot of energy in their religion. They knew the rules. They read the Bible.

Frank, again this morning... I have to tell you who Frank is - the pope! My buddy Frank told everybody to carry a Gospel in your pocket and read a couple verses. This guy is amazing!

Not what Jesus said but how he said it is what I want to think with you about because there is no argument here. The scribes and Pharisees and those people in the synagogue were good religious people. They were - let's make this clear - they were just like you and me. [*Comment from the congregation*] For the record Bobbie Hraba said, "*Superior human beings!*" [*Laughter*] Precisely the opposite! That was their impression. They thought because they cut the grass, shoveled the snow, vacuumed the church, fixed the flowers, arranged the altar, taught Sunday School, never missed a Mass, had Sunday School pins from here to their knees - that they were good and that God loved them because they did it right. They washed their pans the correct way, they ate the right food, they didn't eat food offered to idols, they knew that they were God's holy chosen people. And they weren't casual about it this; they spent their lives with this. They mutilated their baby boys on the eighth day as a part of understanding how obeying the rules helped God to love them.

The rules must have been essentially as ridiculous to them as they are to us today. Despite the ridiculousness - if there is such a word - of the rules, they would in faith obey them so that they could be right and to help God to love them. They also knew the way around the rules. I had in my parish a woman who worked for a man who owned an embroidery shop. He was a very successful man, a very fine man. I am proud to call him at least somewhat of a friend of mine through my parishioner in West New York in New Jersey. A knitting mill and these little cottage industries would work 24 hours a day when the orders came from the rag trades across the Hudson River in New York for lace for the fashions for the next season or embroidery or whatever it was - 24 hours a day - you know, kind of sweat shops, hundreds of sewing machines, piece work and all of this stuff. Well, when certain holidays came, according to the Law he was not allowed to operate his business. So he would sell it to my parishioner, Julie, for a dollar. She would operate the shop. When the holiday was over he'd buy it back. I wanted him to sell it to me just once. I don't think I'd have sold it back. [*Laughter*]

If you lived in or near communities where it becomes a political issue to erect an *eruv* which is a wire that is sometimes strung along all of the telephone poles in the community to expand the enclosed area where one is allowed to walk on the Sabbath so that you can go greater distances on the Sabbath because you're in an enclosure. Let's not be caught pointing our fingers at others. We do it all the time with our rules, don't we? "*Oh Officer, I was only going....*" We do it all the time in our evaluation of our own religiosity. "*I may be bad but I'm not as bad as he is.*" "*I may have done naughty things but not the way she did.*" We're always willing to mollify our own responsibility and guilt. We deal in some kind of understanding that makes sin a little bit better when I do it than when somebody else does it.

Jesus wasn't having any of it. We don't know what he said. We just know how he said it. And what he said is, "*Hypocrisy is not a religious behavior. Hypocrisy is not a religious behavior.*" And I suppose the message - if there's any message at all - in the Gospel today, it's that Jesus communicated his understanding of religion as an authority - but now get this - *not* as an authoritarian. What he chose to share with people, whatever it may have been, I believe was shared with them in love and accompanied with an invitation for each of them to understand that the best pathway to loving others is a good, clear, honest self-evaluation. How can I love others if I don't do my own inventory? What do I have to offer others if I haven't cleaned my own household and swept my own doorstep? How

can I point to the mote in your eye with a log in my own?

The response to how Jesus said what Jesus said, whatever than may have been, was that a crazy man was excited - a man with an unclean spirit. Is there a difference? Figure it however you want. I like to think of him as crazy. He cried out and said, "*What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?*"

And then it's the crazy man who's possessed with a demon, according to scripture, who says, "*We know who you are, the Holy One of God.*" It's the wacko who makes the confession - even though he's unhealthy. Jesus goes on to heal him. But I think what he perceived in Jesus was that *how* Jesus said what Jesus said in terms of religion was able to undo all of religion, all of society, and all of culture - those institutions in which they all lived and had their beings. Jesus essentially was saying, "*What does it matter what you eat if you don't love the person with whom you share your meat? What does it matter if your pots are clean and you haven't bothered to fill them with something for someone in need? What does it matter if you've washed your hands the correct way and deal dirty? What does it matter if you don't believe that you are loved by God and therefore are empowered to love all whom God loves?*" In the one case the poor scribes and Pharisees have a religion founded on contract. "*We do this for you, God - no matter how ridiculous - we do this for you, God. Then you, God, pay up by doing this for us. We do this and you see us as justified. We pay up and then you pay up. We make you, God, our debtor and then we cash in on your affection, your love, your favor.*"

And Jesus says, "*Whoa! That leads you into very poor relationships with most of the rest of the world. That gives you a right not to love your enemy. That gives you a right to move against those who are different from yourselves. That gives you a right to see someone on the other side of the border as not a citizen of the Kingdom of God. That gives you a right....you can fill in the blanks....to see the man in the prison as not worthy of our prayer.*" And Jesus unhinges all of this because all of these people who vehemently and systematically and theologically and socially disagree with him find themselves *loved* by him!

I suppose the only reason my brother and I can have any kind of political discussion is because we love each other. Certainly not because we agree. But it's *how* we share our differences that may be the religious part of that discussion.

And so we never learn what it is that Jesus teaches in the synagogue, but we get a very clear idea of *how* he teaches that. And I invite you to substitute the word *authority* with the word *love*. So he taught them as one having love and not as one in a contractual relationship. So Jesus sees religion as one of a genuine, loving, personal relationship between God and humanity which invites inclusion rather than exclusion, which invites something other than obeying the rules as a religious activity and which stretches and undoes much of the structure that has been inherited which is called religion and society. Now that is frightening and that's enough to make a crazy man say, "*Why are you here?*" And he does ask the question, "*Why are you here? Have you come to destroy us?*" But he does make the confession, "*You are the Holy One of God.*"

Don't ever get caught in this position. Don't ever speak for Jesus if you don't have the words. And I don't have any words that Jesus said, but let me tell you what I *imagine* Jesus said. "*No, I don't come to destroy you. I come to keep you from destroying yourself with your own religion, with your own prejudices which you categorize as religion, with your own hatred of those who are different, foreign, irreligious, unholy, unworthy, undocumented, speakers of other languages, imprisoned, poor, dependent upon society.*" Do you get the picture? Jesus doesn't come to destroy anybody but comes to provide health for all.

Now the interesting thing about the crazy man is that he was *in* the synagogue, he was a part of that organization. I'm willing to say he *was* the organization, and he determined in how Jesus communicated God's love that this *was* going to bring the end to his religious system, his society, his life as he knew it. It would change it dramatically. And he asked directly, "*Have you come to destroy us?*" But Jesus rebuked him saying, "*Aaaa, shut up! Just shut up!*" And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. You'll forgive me this medical analysis. I think he puked his guts onto the floor. He had swallowed and swallowed and swallowed so much pious poison, so much religious hatred, so much fear and had built himself into a cage of religiosity that he couldn't get out, and Jesus just says to him, essentially, "*Forget it! Shut up!*" And when he lets that go he becomes whole, he becomes healthy. And we all know after you vomit you feel way better. So all of this garbage that he had swallowed and that had made him sick and was offered to him, accepted by him and shared by him as authoritarian religious pious regulation was what was making him ill. And he encounters this man who loves him just as lovingly

as anybody possibly ever could just told him to shut up with that stuff and believe that God loves you. And it changed him!

We know that he was not alone in his fear because you and I know the rest of the story. We're preparing now at this point in the year to turn toward Lent and preparations for Easter. We know that these ideas cost Jesus his life. Jesus' life was taken from him by the religious establishment, the social establishment, the political establishment of his day. They could not stand the fact that somebody believed that he was loved by God and that God loved everybody else in the world. It's that simple to me. The equations are that easy. But it does unhinge the structures and it does promise a radical new beginning every day to those who hear Jesus say what Jesus says with authority and not as an authoritarian.

It happens right here in a funny way. Just a week or so ago John said to me, "*St. John's is doing very well but we need children.*" And what was my response, John? "*Have some!*" [Laughter] The illustration is this: as difficult as it is for us to gather groups of children for Sunday School - and thank you Carol and choir for doing those things that you do when kids are here - there is one Sunday School message which is the same message for all. The only things a kid has to learn here at Sunday School is, "*You are loved by God. This is where you belong. You are in a safe place. Grow with us.*" So I don't care. That applies to all ages. That's the message of Jesus. That's what the kids need to get in Sunday School. That's what we need to get here. That's what the world needs to get. You are unmitigatedly, completely, fully accepted and loved by God and so is everyone else. Now how does that change your relationship with others and will that make your relationship with others look like it has some kind of authority. And if your authority needs an army to exert itself, it's probably not right.

Just for one second imagine if we as a nation took what we spend on armaments, defense and all that stuff and bought food for anybody in the world who was hungry - food and clothing. Who would bite that hand? And yet we argue about supplying it for our own, much less the world.

So Jesus shares a radical way of being in love with God and sharing that with others. And it healed the wacky man of his demon and it can heal us of ours. What is this? A new teaching? With authority? He commands even the unclean spirits and even they obey him. Let's try that one on for size. Period.

Now allow me to switch gears. Tomorrow is the second of February and you know that's a very important date. Did I hear Groundhog's Day? Yes! [A voice from the congregation: "*Punxsutawney!*"] And you have a relationship to Punxsutawney. Let me see whether or not I can get most of this. Your ancestor who was a missionary to China was captured by the Chinese and stood on the doorstep of the town hall somewhere in China and said "*I'm from Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania*" very loudly and slowly and that frightened the Chinese and they let him go!

The second of February is a very layered kind of day in the significance of the Church and the world and how we mark time. Long before we got the Gregorian Calendar the world and society marked time in terms of quarter days. On or around the winter solstice which is December 21<sup>st</sup> we get Christmas. Then the next quarter day three months later we get the first day of spring. The year was divided into quarters. The first day of spring in the Church gets close to the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary. Halfway between those quarters are what are called cross quarter days. Cross quarter days were days when servants were hired. In the English Church they "beat the bounds." They would go outside of the church and they would walk around the boundary with sticks to mark out who owns what part of the land. They were the day that taxes were paid. The fields started to get red to be prepared for planting. I knew spring was on the way a couple weeks ago. I smelled the skunks making love outside of our bedroom window. Spring's not far away when that's going on! [Laughter]

Also in the life of the Church. How many days ago was Christmas from tomorrow? Forty days. After the birth of Jesus, you know women are impure, bloody messes all the time. Forty days after birth then you get purified. Mary goes to the temple for purification. It's also the day when we remember in the life of the Church Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple and present him to the old priest Simeon and the prophetess Anna. That's where we get the wonderful hymn known as the *Nunc Dimittis*. Simeon was promised that he wouldn't die until he had seen the savior of the world, and in walks Mary and Joseph to be purified with the right sacrifices. They were poor so they brought turtle doves. And Simeon sees this baby and says, "*Now I can die. My eyes have seen the salvation which God has given to the whole world, a light for the Gentiles and the glory of the people Israel.*" So from his very early days he's not just for one kind of religious people, but religion for all kinds of people, for the world - and a light! And so the connection with the light. In the English Church the second of February is traditionally when all of the candles that

are to be used in the church throughout the year are blessed - Candlemas. All of that light and shadow business is probably somehow culturally related to the groundhog in Punxsutawney. It seems to me it would be a great shame if we in the Church just skipped over that and said, "*O well, it's the second of February.*" Marking of time - it's a great hinge pin in the life and calendar of the Church because now we turn our attention from the incarnation, the birth narratives, the epiphanies of Jesus, toward Lent, toward spring, toward the ministry, passion, death of Jesus and the salvific work, what his sense of religion costs him when he walks into Jerusalem to tell people that God loves them and it frightens them out of their wits so they kill him. It's all applicable to us today. I noticed when we came out of the theater yesterday and it was still light outside. How's that? Something is happening. Something is afoot. The world is changing and we're a part of that glory. At the end of this liturgy we'll gather in the narthex, the porch of the church, and distribute candles and we'll bring Epiphany to a conclusion with a few prayers that are added on at the end. Amen.