“***Teaching with Authority”*** by S. Finlan. The First Church, Jan. 31, 2021

**Deuteronomy 18:18–19**

18I 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. 19Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.

**Mark 1:21–28**

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, throwing him into convulsions 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 commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” 28At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

Did you have a special teacher during your junior high, high school, or college years? One who impressed you not only by making you want to learn the subject matter of the course, but left you with some principles to live by? Multiply that experience by fifty, and you may be able to imagine that extraordinary teacher, Moses; multiply by another ten and you can imagine Jesus. They both taught with authority, charisma, and conviction. In addition, Jesus used his healings and exorcisms as teaching occasions, such as the times when he said “your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:50; 8:48).

In Deuteronomy, God will send prophets who are like Moses. Moses is thus the pattern. What about Moses is important? Is it the fact that he lacked self-confidence at the beginning of his ministry? Moses protests that he is “slow of speech and slow of tongue. . . Please send someone else” (Exod 4:10, 13). God says “I will be with your mouth . . . and will teach you what you shall do” (4:15). There are other problems with Moses, such as his when he attacked and killed an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew (Exod 2:12). I don’t think these are the things that caused God to make Moses the pattern for the prophets. It was his loyalty and integrity, as well as his intimacy with God. Exodus says “The Lord used to speak with Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (Exod 33:11). And, of course, as the lawgiver, Moses expected the Hebrews to abide by the law and to be just in all their dealings. Even in his attack on the Egyptian, it was his deep sense of justice that prompted him to defend the victim. He also defended some Midianite girls who were chased away from a well by some bossy shepherds; he defended them “and watered their flock” (Exod 2:16–17). Moses was powerful but gentle. Look at the moral fiber of the Mosaic law: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself. . . You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Lev 19:18, 34). This has deep moral logic.

Based on the character and teaching of Moses, justice and loyalty to the one God became the characteristics that defined the prophets that followed him. One wonders, though, if the message wasn’t harsh and burdensome sometimes. A never-ending emphasis on doing right, can result in feelings of failure and guilt whenever one falls short in any way. Were the ways of Moses and the prophets sometimes hyper-serious, full of threats, and devoid of joy or humor? When you jump into the middle of the prophets, you are likely to land on a threatening passage. For instance, the first oracle in Zephaniah begins “I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord . . . I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth” (Zeph 1:2–3). Even the more beautiful book of Isaiah contains many threats of punishment.

That changes with Jesus. Jesus went beyond the justice mandate, and made love of God and neighbor the supreme command. He taught that love has persuasive power: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). And we can think of the centurion at the crucifixion, who, after seeing Jesus’ behavior, said “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39). He was convinced solely by Jesus’ behavior at the crucifixion, by his nobility and generosity, and the absence of any scorn or vengefulness. There was great persuasive power in Jesus’ teaching because he lived it out; *this* gave his teaching authority. His kindness to children, his respect for women and foreigners, were noticed and remembered. To the woman with haemorrhages who was ashamed, he said “take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well” (Matt 9:22). Imagine how that changed her life! He raised her social status, as well as healing her affliction. And his action here taught a lesson to others, that one should always respect even the downcast or marginalized person. God might have something special for that person.

After all, love is not just the mandate for humans, it is the fact about God. Jesus taught that love is what God does; it’s not just what he wants *us* to do. God is not being hypocritical when God asks *us* to be forgiving. *God* is forgiving. Jesus taught by example, and he made religion a source of joyous service rather than strict duty, which can be burdensome.

We sometimes forget the humor in Jesus’ sayings. For instance, how preposterous is this, if taken literally? “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. . . [Yet] what is impossible for mortals is possible for God” (Luke 18:25, 27). It *is* possible, after all. But it’s a funny image. Even his moral teaching can utilize comical images: “how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?” (Luke 6:42). Can you imagine someone walking around with a log in their eye, and unaware of it? It’s absurd. But so is the way that some people fail to notice their own flaws but are so ready to criticize others.

And the joy in his teaching seems unavoidable, although some Christians manage to avoid it. “Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14:27). “I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15:15). Being a friend of this great teacher should bring joy to our hearts. This is the prophet who is also our friend, our brother, and our Creator. But he doesn’t feel a need to lord it over us. He tells us *all* to “take heart.” He not only teaches with authority, he authoritatively empowers us. He is a friend who makes us stronger. Have you ever had a friend that actually makes you feel stronger? Jesus is that, and so much more.