

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

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Our first lesson this morning is really part of Moses' farewell speech (actually, most of the Book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell speech). He has been leading the people of Israel for more than 40 years. He put up with their shenanigans back in Egypt; he endured their bickering, their backbiting, and their whining out in the wilderness; he made sure they were fed and watered; he even got them to the promised land. Twice. So here he is giving his good-bye speech to everyone, this leader – a man who knows what he's doing, one who truly speaks to the people of Israel with authority.

Paul too, in our second lesson, is someone who speaks with authority as he addresses the congregation in Corinth. This congregation has been having some trouble, they're struggling one with another, and the problem he addresses in what we heard today concerns meat that has been sacrificed to other gods. (The way it worked, was that people would make sacrifices to Apollo or Zeus or whomever, and then whatever meat was not eaten by the folks who ran the temple was offered to the neighborhood – sort of like a neighborhood barbeque; that's how many of the poorer folks were fed and got a decent meal, by taking part in these sacrifices made to the false gods.) Paul said to the people, 'we know that God has made all food acceptable to us. We don't have to follow the dietary restrictions any more' (in fact, Peter had a vision about that – you can read about it in the Book of Acts), so all food was acceptable to all believers. But, Paul says – there's always a big "but" in there – but if in eating that meat that has been sacrificed to some other god, another believer whose faith is not as strong as mine, sees me eating meat that has been sacrificed to Apollo says to himself, If Paul is meeting meat that has been sacrificed to Apollo, does that mean that Paul is worshiping Apollo as well as Jesus? Does that mean that Apollo is the same as Jesus?

So Paul says, 'If my eating meat (even though I know, I have it on the authority of God that it doesn't matter) but if my eating meat is going to cause someone else to struggle in his faith, then I will not eat meat because I also understand that not everybody's faith is the same as mine.'

In the opening chapter of the Gospel of Mark (by the way – Mark is a really great gospel; it is the shortest gospel of all four and I have it on very good authority from a former confirmation student that you can read the entire gospel in about an hour, which I think he did during one of my worship services). Mark is the action-packed gospel – everything happens "immediately" and here in Mark's Gospel that we heard last week, only halfway through chapter one, Jesus has just called Simon and Andrew and James and John to "follow me and I will make you fish for people." Today, Jesus and His disciples are at Capernaum on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and they have gone to the local synagogue. Now the synagogues of Jesus' day are not like the synagogues we're familiar with today; they were places for learning; you went to temple for worship but the synagogue was like a church school they went to hear and learn about and become better versed in the scriptures. And as in all schools and churches, not every teacher was as good as every other, so those in attendance were astounded at the manner in which Jesus was teaching

because apparently he was blowing the socks off of everybody around him. Jesus was teaching as someone who knows what he's talking about. To put it in more modern terms, Jesus was the Gil Grissom of forensic science, or the Bill Gates of computing software; he knows his stuff, he shares his knowledge. And apparently he does it in a manner that those he's teaching can comprehend what he's saying. I'm sure many of us have picked up a book or listened to a lecture or presentation or sat through a session at work or in school or somewhere, where the person giving the message was obviously a very intelligent individual, but what he or she was saying just went way over our head. Jesus was able to get his message across in a manner the people could understand, and he spoke with authority. My *American Heritage* dictionary defines "authority", as "confidence derived from experience or practice; firm self-assurance." That is how Jesus was teaching.

Authority is not always the best thing, and there are some people who have been in positions of authority who have abused their positions, but most often authority is a very good thing for us. The Boy Scouts, for example, learn from those who have gone before them, learn by example and from their authority, and they too, can move up the ranks from Cub Scouts, to Boy Scouts, and maybe eventually become a Boy Scout leader. They learn from people in authority.

Within the confines of our faith, authority tells us what is right, what is proper, what is true. The authority of our faith tells us what very great thing Nicholas and Samantha did this morning, how their parents were willing to bring them forward in front of all of you (which can be kind of scary) to have Nicholas and Samantha stand in front of you to join the family of God, the same family that that authoritative guy by the name of Jesus is a part of. Baptism is what binds us together; baptism is that daily physical reminder as we wash up in the morning, as the water flows over us in the shower or while we're standing at the sink, we can make the sign of the cross to remind us of our own baptism – that can be a daily physical reminder of the forgiveness of our sins, the sign of God's grace.

Another thing this authority of faith brings about is the celebration of the Eucharist, the celebration of the meal of bread and wine, the Body and the Blood – "do this," Jesus says, "in remembrance of me." Do this, He says, because it's good for you. Do this, Jesus says, because in doing so you will be spiritually strengthened. Do this, Jesus says, because I'm telling you to.

We get that a lot, don't we, from mom and dad? Do this because I'm telling you to. Do this because it's good for you. Eat your vegetables because they're good for you. I ate my vegetables as a kid. I didn't like them, but I ate them – and they were indeed good for me. I didn't know that, but the people in authority – my parents – knew, and so I did it.

These examples of authority – Moses, Jesus, Paul – are people we should strive to emulate, although I don't think I can ever get close to doing that. But I know, because Jesus promised it, in everything I do, in everything that happens to me, all of the good things I strive to do and all the things that aren't so good I end up doing (we call that stuff "sin"), in everything I do and everything that happens to me, God is with me and God loves me. Regardless of if I'm doing good or doing stuff that's not so good. God wants us to do good. God calls us to do good. God calls us to live in that divine love and learn from the authority of God, knowing that we will never get it right on our own, but knowing too, that we don't have to because we are forgiven. And we have that knowledge on the best authority we know – the authority of the blood-stained cross.

**Amen**

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