

“Caught in the Midst of New Teachings, but Old Complaints”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury

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Deuteronomy 18:15-20 and Mark 1:21-28

It was a significant moment in defining this certain minister’s career as my predecessor in an earlier church served. One morning he called together the choir, and instead of praying for and with them as was his custom, he asked them to pray for him.

“I do not have a sermon today,” he began, “so I need you to pray for me that God would give me a message as I walk out this hallway into the sanctuary.”

Now I am not sure what happened next. Knowing those in the choir, I am sure someone offered words of hope and encouragement.

What I know is the response to that request. Some saw in those words an example of the spirit-filled leadership of the minister, he was willing to be open and bare his soul to trusted members of the congregation, recognizing that the journey of faith was to be shared, and not controlled or managed by one person alone.

Others saw it as an indication it was time for him to move on. One person even wondered if that was not the first time he entered without anything to say – only this time he was open and honest about it.

Still others, trying to be understanding, said that a minister may come less prepared some weeks, but why tell us? The message we seek never comes from the minister but from God – it is not about the preacher but the way the spirit uses the preacher’s words to speak to me.

I like the last person's insights. Gives me reason to relax since I had one of those weeks, about 68 hours and counting from last Sunday, where I did not know how I would find time to prepare a sermon.

This might be the week, I thought, when I would have to fess up to my operating principle the last 39 years: "You can fake a sermon, but you can't fake a bulletin." Bulletin was done, and so now what?

Well, rest assured, I found a message this week (it actually popped up on my blackberry screen as I was at another of my innumerable meetings over the last 6 days). It said in bold letters: "a sermon for those who have nothing to say on Sunday."

Perfect, I thought, and downloaded it as soon as I had a few minutes. This would be the answer to my prayers. But sadly, I was wrong.

The author offers a way to write a sermon clearly, concisely, quickly for a minister who has no time in the week. It is an emergency offering. Or so is the intention.

"Find a modern day story that captures what you want to say," he begins, "and develop that story for the congregation. It should be engaging and informative, topical and one that touches people on a variety of levels."

Then he says the preacher needs to speak to the theme of the day – a theme that the story points to, and the scripture passages lift up as they have been read and pondered.

Then go to the scriptures, and having captured people's imagination with your current, topical story, and having delineated the message or the theme through a few sentences, a paragraph at most, people are ready to hear the scriptures with new ears, and your sermon is underway.

“Wait a minute,” I thought to myself, “that is what I seek to do week by week.” This person not only told me nothing I didn’t already know, he was stealing my preaching style and sharing it with the whole world without giving me credit.

Okay, that’s where I may have gone a bit off-base. You see, all that we learn and ideas we share are hardly our own.

So here is my story for this week to introduce the message: If you are like me you have trouble keeping up with all of the leadership changes around the world. China is one country where leadership changes seem to be a regular occurrence since the era of Mao Zedong. Xi Jinping became leader of China a couple of years ago. His early months were an attempt to consolidate power. No longer is China seen as being ruled by a leadership collective, for Xi (his family name, pronounced “shee”) is very much in charge of things.

He has been called “bold” and “down to earth,” and China’s strongest leader “in years.” He is seen as the leader who will bring the largest nation in the world into the circle of the world’s greatest powers. Xi, says a recent *Time* magazine article “has bluntly asserted his authority.”

So is that what is meant by Jesus when it says that he read the scriptures and taught “as one with authority”?

Clearly not. You see, Jesus came with a confidence and clarity that was unique and special, yet what those who heard him identified in Jesus was the sense that he was not building up his own reputation, but seeking to speak about what God expected of us. Jesus’ authority was an authority based on a clear message, not a cult of personality.

We usually make a mistake in our assessment of Jesus if we want to turn him into a populist. Jesus taught and shared in ways that got some people's backs up and caused division and uncertainty. Everyone who comes with a clear message expects some push back – or at least they should. No matter what we do, the same old complaints may be heard.

Jesus did not focus on what people did not like, but on what he understood God expected of us. It need not be an elaborate or complicated message. It needed to be simple, straightforward, clear.

Do we have a clear sense of what “teaching with authority” really means in our day? Are we skeptical about those who seem to be clear in their teachings, and confident in their approach? Is complaining our first line of approach in the midst of new ideas and change, or are we willing to listen intently to whatever someone offers? Are we afraid to speak up when our voices need to be heard because no one else seems to care?

How do we handle uncertainty, especially when others seem so confident and certain?

Jesus spoke with authority, not because he was a political leader in the making (even though some expected the messiah to be just that) but because he was confident that God had called him to present a different message with a different focus. It was not a message about “we” and “them” but about “us.”

Let us be able to hear that message, and move forward with that teaching, as we face challenging and changing circumstances all around us.

