

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 9C, May 29, 2016
Galatians 1:1-12**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

What do you consider to be authoritative? What are the key considerations for you when you need to make a decision? What matters and what matters the most? Where is the authority in your life? I'm going to ask you again in a few minutes, so let it percolate in the back of your brain.

Phyllis Tickle's 2008 book *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* is about significant reconfigurations that have occurred in Christianity roughly every 500 years. Jesus' life, death and resurrection 2000 years ago created Christianity out of its Jewish roots and since then major shifts have occurred in the 6th, 11th and 16th centuries. In a broad sweep of historical and social analysis, Tickle identifies changing sources of authority as the most important aspect each time: "Always without fail," she writes, "the thing that gets lost early in the process of a reconfiguration is any clear and general understanding of who or what is to be used as the arbitrator of correct belief, action, and control." (45) In the century leading up to the Great Reformation, for instance, "the primacy of the papacy and the relative unity and stability its authority had formerly exercised in European affairs were both shattered" by the phenomenon of warring Popes found in both Italy and France. (44) The authority of the Roman Pope was solidified relatively early in the 15th century, but, so the saying goes, you can't un-ring a bell. And when the Great Reformation finally and fully arrived in the next century, the new answer to the key question: "Where now is the authority?" was *sola scriptura, scripture sola* - only the scripture and the scriptures only.

We are about 18 months away from the 500 year anniversary of that fateful day when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg... a decisive day when Luther set out a response "to pressures that had been building around his natal form of Christianity and culture for over a century." (43) In those 500 years, and particularly in the last century, I wonder what you think about the locus of authority in our society and in our church? Where, now, is the authority? Let's take a moment to consider it both personally and in the broader society. What is authoritative for you? What is authoritative in our culture? What has changed? [comments; discussion...]

James Penner's "truth hierarchies": scripture - reason/nature - science - experience... flipped for Millennials!

Our epistle reading today from Galatians offers us some insight into the changing nature of authority in Paul's day. The opening sentence in the introduction to a commentary on the letter as a whole reads: "Paul's angry, passionate letter to the churches of Galatia provides a glimpse of the controversy that surrounded the expansion of the Christian movement into Gentile communities in the ancient Mediterranean world." (NIB, 183) Today we get a taste of Paul's anger and passion in the opening verses of the letter. He begins by identifying himself as an apostle "sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ

and God the Father, who raised him from the dead..." The very opening words cue us to the fact that the question of authority is primary among Paul's concerns. From the first words, Paul claims the authority to preach the gospel and to speak for God.

Following the initial greeting, Paul immediately launches into a stinging rebuke of his readers - ostensibly members of the churches in Galatia. He uses rather harsh polemical language to condemn "a different gospel" that must be gaining traction and a following in the area. Such language begs the question: What is this "different gospel" about which Paul is so angry? We have to keep reading the letter to find out, but for curiosity and clarity's sake, let me give you the Cole's notes version, again taken from a commentary introduction that identifies the key issue: "The identity of the newly established mission churches was up for grabs: Were they to be understood as branches on the tree of Judaism, or were they to be understood as belonging to a new a distinctive community, neither Jewish nor pagan? Were Gentile converts bound to accept Jewish practices and values? In what ways were they free to maintain their former ways of life?" (NIB, 183) In other words, Paul's letter to the Galatians as a whole opens up to us a snapshot of the debate, sometimes flaring into open conflict, about how to include Gentiles in the community emerging out of Judaism and proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. At issue in particular was the practice of circumcision and more broadly of following the Torah - the Law of Moses. Does the authority remain in the chain of tradition, including its beliefs and practices, or does greater authority lie elsewhere? In the religious upheaval and reconfiguration, where, now, was the authority?

That is to come in the letter, but for now, for the beginning, the issue of primary importance to Paul is in establishing his own authority to speak for God. We hear it most clearly in the last 2 verses today, in what a commentator describes as Paul's thesis statement: "For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." (1:11-12) Here, and throughout the letter, Paul employs common rhetorical strategies of his day. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion. It has been used in every culture since time immemorial as a normal part of human society. Among the common aspects of rhetorical speech in Paul's world were appeals to ethos, pathos and logos... that is the trustworthiness of the speaker, emotional impact and intellectual reasoning. Paul uses all of them in this letter, beginning today with ethos... building a case for his trustworthiness and credentials as someone they should listen to attentively and, ultimately, believe and trust as correct.

Paul's thesis we hear today comes in 3 parts, with 2 negative assertions and then one positive. Paul should be believed because the gospel he preaches and teaches is of divine origin, evidenced by that fact that 1) it is not of human origin; 2) he didn't receive it from a human source, nor was he taught it; and 3) it came through God's revelation of Jesus Christ. These arguments serve to respond to criticism that Paul learned the gospel from the apostle's in Jerusalem - Peter and the gang - but is now "watering it down", deviating from it, and disregarding the divinely given commandments of the Law. (NIB, 210) Paul declares such a view wrong, in no uncertain terms, and proclaims instead his unmediated access to God's revelation of Jesus Christ. The gospel "came" to Paul "as a powerful, in-breaking word" directly from God. God's activity alone is what reorients human perception and knowledge.

Such an argument for his own trustworthiness is not an easy one to make! This is evidenced in that what we hear today is merely the opening. Paul goes on for the rest of the chapter and all through the next one to make his case and clarify his credentials as a bonified messenger of God. Throughout, Paul's message is one of God's grace and grace alone as the source of revelation and indeed, salvation. This gospel of Paul's was a decisive break from Jewish tradition and practice and it caused no small amount of conflict in the early years of Christianity.

We will be hearing various passages from Galatians over the next several weeks, as assigned by our lectionary. I also encourage you to read through the letter once again with the prayer to hear Paul's gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, once more as a revelation from God. As we do, let us wonder about the sources of authority on which we draw in our world today? Where, now, is the authority in our lives and in the church? And let us remind ourselves once again about the grace and love we proclaim in Christ crucified and risen.