

Sermon/Rector's Address for the 99th Annual Parish Meeting of
St. Christopher's Episcopal Church in Oak Park, IL
On January 29, 2012, the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany,
(Year b) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

Readings (shortened to two): 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Mark 1:22

More than 300 years before the birth of Jesus, most people believed that Aristotle's claim that "the heavier an object is, the faster it will fall to earth," was true. It wasn't, but since the famed theorist was regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of all time, no one challenged him. In fact, for almost 2,000 years no one even *tested* Aristotle's theory, until Galileo – according to legend – performed a simple experiment in 1589. Dropping two cannon balls of different weights from the Leaning Tower of Pisa, Galileo found that both masses landed at the exact same time.

The problem *was* that those invited there to witness this experiment apparently denied what they had seen. "That can't be right," they argued, much like creationists argue evolution. "What's true is true!" They preferred the dogma of their day to the threat of new ideas, for those can be threatening. They certainly threatened the scribes, and yet there are others who long for new ideas/new teachings and recognize the truth in them when it appears. Such is the case in today's Gospel, where Mark writes, "Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. (And) they were astounded at his teaching, for "he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes."

Jesus taught with *inner* authority, which came from a secure sense of God, himself and the world. It came from intimate encounter with the Living God and from a loving bond with humankind. In contrast, the authority of the scribes came from erudite encounters with the Law of Moses. These were educated men, trained to interpret and to teach Mosaic Law. They were '*certified*' thinkers, if you will. And yet their rank and role too often led the scribes into a web of legal minutia that inhibited God's truth and inhabited their souls, not unlike the unclean spirit that inhabited the man whom Jesus heals in today's Gospel.

Such spirits inhibit God's mercy, love and justice for *all* people, feeding instead a sense of one's own power, virtue and authority over others. No wonder outsiders welcomed Jesus – welcomed authority that transcended that of the scribes. No wonder his teachings moved them, prompting the question, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority!" Jesus didn't just talk the talk; he *walked* the talk. And this changes everything – as Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr says happens all the time in people whose authority comes from within.

“People with *true* inner authority ‘author’ us,” writes Rohr in his book *Near Occasions of Grace*. “They create life in us. . . As with Jesus, power comes out *from* them.” After all, true authority isn’t something conferred by rank or role, but something conveyed from within by those who’re open to engage honestly with holy questions. “Does what *I* am doing serve a greater purpose?” they ask, or “Does what we are doing together extend God’s mercy, love and justice to all people?” They recognize the claim of inner authority to create lives of positive action, especially in tough times.

Tough times are fertile ground for cultivating inner spiritual authority – at least with God’s help – as I’ve seen this past year at St. Christopher’s. For the most part, of course, 2011 was anything *but* tough for our parish. We welcomed new members, increased Sunday attendance, and found new ways to reach out to others and reach in to nurture our own spiritual lives. Then again, when a physical condition that I had long ignored demanded treatment, things got tough . . . or so it seemed to me. Temporary, part-time disability followed, and when Father David – who had agreed to help out, required unexpected surgery . . . well I can tell you, I felt shaken.

I wondered how we’d manage, but the parish didn’t bat an eye. Senior Warden Eva Pearson, for example – in company with your treasurer Marty Dunlavey and a supportive vestry – stepped up to the plate. Staff members Barbara Kohnhorst and Janene Bergen – along with non-paid staff member Linda Bolte – added some of my jobs to already heavy workloads. Chris Miller, Barbra Luce-Turner and Jon Baumgarten from Grace Church took over confirmation classes. And many others helped preach, oversee events, connect with newcomers, and minister in ways too numerous to name.

My husband, Michael, along with Mary Joe Leverette, also looked after me at home; and although I felt shaken by my lack of productivity, what I eventually discovered is that it was *God* who doing the shaking. God was shaking my sense of self *and* that of the parish, revealing within both of us an inner authority that comes from encounter with God. It comes from trusting God’s love for all people, which Paul says in today’s epistle, is the only thing that can draw us closer to God and one another.

And how do I know that this was God – *not* God making me sick – but God drawing us closer? I know because the fruit of this “tough time” – this time of diminished capacity for me and increased ministry for you, is good. For instance, in November when my treatment was at its worst, pledges at St. Christopher’s were behind by \$12,000, but by the end of December were back on track. In November we had a substantial projected deficit, but ended the year with a sizable surplus. In 2010 our average Sunday attendance was 109 – a 5% increase from the previous year – but this year grew by an additional 6.4% to 116. Similarly, in a tough economy we gave

away \$10,000 in outreach funds, not to mention many hands-on hours given faithfully to feed the hungry, house the homeless and clothe those seeking work.

All in all, it has been a good year, so much that some have said that I should stay away more often . . . which you *might* just twist my arm to do. My hope, though, is that I won't need to stay away for you to claim your inner authority for ministry – to live into God's call to build up the Body of Christ – connecting to and caring for each other in the church and in the world. *This* is what matters – not the rules the scribes lord over others or the food restrictions Paul describes.

What matters is relationship – to God and one another – as your vestry understood when they opened last year's vestry retreat with the names of every one of you – every person on our church directory – pasted on the walls around the room in which we sat. One by one we checked off names of people that we had *some* link to, and then looked at those who weren't connected. We divided *all* the names among your vestry members and we've worked – and are working still – to connect with each.

Likewise we have worked to deepen our relationships to God. We participated in a study on contemplative prayer in February, held ongoing Bible study and prayer workshops, started “Women at the Tap” When “women at the Well” began to wane, and offered diversity in worship – not only with three distinct services – but by trying new things like special evensongs, two more contemplative Holy Week services, Morning Prayer in Lent and on Thanksgiving, and a summer Jazz Mass.

We've discovered that there's truth in new ideas when they come from God, and so *this* year I want to challenge you to try out something new. Experiment, like Galileo did. Join Bible Encounter or start a new prayer group. Serve a PADS shift when we house the homeless at St. C's. Attend a special worship service in *addition* to Sunday morning. Or come to a fellowship event, introduce yourself to someone you don't know, help in our Back-to Work-Clothes Closet, which has recently expanded its outreach to Veterans. But most importantly, embrace inner authority in Jesus Christ, who offered a *living* teaching – with authority! *Amen.*