

Deuteronomy 18: 15 – 20
1 Corinthians 8: 1 – 13
Mark 1: 21 – 28
4 Epiphany, Yr. B

The Rev. Dr. Dennis S. Tierney
Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church
Bainbridge Island, Washington
January 29, 2012

“Fire and Love”

Olly Neal grew up poor in the segregated South. Neither of his parents completed elementary school. He grew up without electricity or running water. He was a terror in the classroom and a very poor student. Cutting class one day, he noticed a book in the library with an alluring cover on it. He was surprised to see it was written by a black man and decided to try to read it, but fearful he would be teased for even having a book, he stole it from the library. When he returned it, there was another book on the shelf by the same author. He stole that one and returned to find yet another book. This continued for weeks and Olly began to change. He worked harder at his lessons, was more cooperative and thoughtful. Today, Olly Neal holds several college degrees, is a judge in his home state, and all of his children have advanced academic degrees. This is not an advertisement for stealing books from libraries; the reason for those carefully selected books being right at hand was that his beleaguered elementary teacher Miss Grady had seen him take that first book and she personally drove to Memphis, two hours away by car, to buy him books, out of her own pocket, because she sensed that this might be the key to changing Olly Neal – and she was right. Her success as a teacher turned not on just her professional knowledge of how to teach children, but it was also embedded in her love for teaching, her love for learning, and her passionate belief and her love that all children can learn and develop all their gifts. It is not enough to have only knowledge; one must always have love. But the reverse of that is also true in many areas of life; it is not enough to just have love, one must also have knowledge as well.

This is the issue in our reading from Saint Paul this morning. This part of his letter to the Corinthians is about a pastoral conflict over whether one could buy meat from the local temple and eat it without committing a sin. That is, could a faithful follower of Christ Jesus do business with pagans? Paul gives, as Paul often does, a complicated answer that balances both knowledge and love. In essence, he says, “Look, there is only one God and one Lord Christ Jesus, so pagans are harmless and so, if they have a special on lamb, go for it. But, Paul also says, don’t embarrass those who think it is a sin to eat meat from the pagan temple and don’t proudly serve that pagan lamb to guests who would be upset to learn they were eating what they think is contaminated food.” Paul is balancing the knowledge that comes from his logical thinking over against the need to be pastorally sensitive to the beliefs of others.

In the case of Miss Grady and Olly Neal, one could argue that Miss Grady should have confronted Olly with his act of stealing and punished him in accordance with the rules of the school. She would have been correct to do that. But Miss Grady used her authority as a teacher at a deeper level and operated out of love to stay the official hand of authority for a time to see if a new way of being might be nurtured within Olly. Miss Grady understood that her authority as a teacher, as a representative of the official world of adults, needed to be handled with great care and delicacy so that fragile new ways of being might blossom and take root. It has been said that great teachers teach like their hair is on fire. But I think great teachers always teach with great love for all their students – so it’s fire and love in equal measure that creates change in others.

In Paul's case, he is arguing for a similar level of sensitivity about the uses of authority, especially when we are trying to teach new ways of being. The ultimate purpose of authority is not merely to control people's base desires but rather to construct new and healthier ways of being in the world. To build up rather than tear down, to foster new ways of behaving rather than crush old ways of being, to pull forward rather than to push back, these are the better goals of holding authority; these are the true goals of teaching, of converting, of building faith.

This is why Moses agrees that the people will need new prophets, prophets that will come after Moses. Talking to God directly is too scary for the people; remember even Moses ends up with that heavenly sunburn. But notice what Moses says about the job of being a prophet. The people must believe the prophet because the prophet speaks God words; but note also that any prophet who fiddles with God's message or mixes up God's message with earthly desires for power or control – that prophet will die.

In our Gospel message, we hear a similar message – to teach as if our hair is on fire but teach with great love. Jesus astonishes his synagogue class with the authority of his teaching. His knowledge is remarkably broad and deep (we, of course, get the inside joke – this is the guy who truly wrote the book!) and that is openly acknowledged. But who is it that recognizes the true source of this knowledge? As is so often the case on Mark's Gospel, it is the wrong people who see who Jesus is. In this case, it is a demon – the evil side of human life; the dark side if you prefer your theology from "Star Wars." And Jesus drives out the unclean spirit to free the man from the bondage of evil. But the crowd still doesn't get it completely. They think Jesus is worth listening to for reasons of power and authority – they misperceive the fire of Jesus's ministry, and they miss what we learn more about in later lessons, that the impetus for all that fire is great abiding love. The underlying thrust of all that authority, all that knowledge, all that power is a profound love for all creation, a love that deeply desires that all of creation be one in love and harmony. For as we already know, the final acts of Jesus, offered in those terrible last days in Jerusalem are acts of love, not authority.

As Christians, we, too, are called to focus on acts of love rather than only authority. We are often tempted by our hard-won knowledge and skill, by our power and authority, to indulge in acts of control and domination. We persist in the belief that we can make people change. We persist in believing that others will change if we insist on it. And sometimes we get the appearance of agreement; the illusion of control. I know that I am guilty of recurring delusions of adequacy. I can tell you that the historic definition of my church title, rector, is ruler. I am, on paper, the ruler of Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church. But I also know I would be a crashing failure if I routinely acted that way. This work of mutual ministry is about teaching and preaching and ministering as if my hair is on fire, but my actions, though grounded in knowledge and skill, supported by your concurrence is fundamentally a covenantal relationship energized and nurtured in and through love.

So, how do we minister as if our hair is on fire but we are driven by great love? We do so by always tempering our efforts to change ourselves and the world by the leavening effect of great love. We work to catch people being good. We never ask others to do things we ourselves would not do. We work to ensure that others are comfortable before we sit down. We plant

trees under whose shade we will never sit. We take care of the gifts we have been given and then we add our own gifts to the pile. Last week, I saw two pictures in our “Year in Review” video that capture this notion wonderfully. One was the giving tree all decorated in our parish parlor. The very next picture showed that same tree with all our gifts nestled under and around it and those gifts filled the picture to bursting.

That is the image I hope for in our life together here at Saint Barnabas. With great passion, we offer together the fire in our hearts and, if needs be, in our hair, but always, always with great love witnessing to the Good News of God in Christ to draw people to us so that we all, old and new, might pile up our gifts under the evergreen tree of Christian life. Amen.