

Sermon "Transfer of Power"

Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 18:15-20, Mark 1:21-28

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Our first scripture reading, Deuteronomy 18:15-20, is a part of the "Torah of Moses," a section of Deuteronomy wherein Moses authorizes a series of leadership roles, judges, king, priests, as well as prophets. These leadership roles are to guide Israel when it comes into the land of Canaan, so that the community of faith may maintain its distinct identity as God's people who live by the ten commandments, received at Mount Horeb, with moral character. Those who serve in these authoritative roles will transfer their power when their work is complete. Each judge, king, priest and prophet will be held accountable as they hold God's people accountable. Hear now God's Holy word.

*15 The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. 16 This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die." 17 Then the Lord replied to me: "They are right in what they have said. 18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. 19 Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. 20 But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die." Amen.*

Glory to God in the Highest indeed! Amen. Part of the wonder and mystery of our faith is that the God, the heavenly king, whom we worship and praise, joined us in our humanity in Jesus of Nazareth. Our gospel reading, Mark 1:21-28, follows Jesus' call to the disciples in last week's lectionary. Today, we find ourselves in the synagogue witnessing Jesus' first miracle. Mark tells us what astounded the other witnesses on that Sabbath was the authority with which Jesus taught and healed. Listen to what the spirit is saying.

*21 They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “Transfer of Power”

*Text: Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. Deuteronomy 18:19*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for holding us and those who lead us accountable in the transfer of power. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The seed to preach a sermon on the transfer of power was planted when Peter and I were in New Hampshire last September prior to the sale of the family homestead to distribute the artwork of his father, William Tolbert Kieffer Jr., and we came across the sculpture subtitled “The Transfer of Power.” The 26-inch Italian bronze piece features David leaping over sleeping Saul while holding Saul’s spear and water sack, symbolizing the power of civic duty and the power of life. The sculpture, now transferred to the front garden of the Kieffer Home, emanates from I Samuel 26:12 and highlights the self-control and moral integrity of David who could have taken King Saul’s life at that moment; however, in obedience and solidarity, David listened to the voice of God rather than the voices around him of his military leaders. Although David had been anointed by the prophet Samuel to succeed Saul as king many years earlier when he was called from the hills as a young shepherd by his father, the time had not yet come for the transfer of power within the kingship.

The “Torah of Moses” in Deuteronomy establishes kings along with judges, priests and prophets as one of the leadership roles to guide Israel, so that the Hebrew community may maintain its distinct identity as God’s people. Because of the power in the role and the potential for corruption, Yahweh, Moses, and Samuel all initially resist establishing a kingship. Each king will be accountable for his rule and for the transfer of power, according to Moses.

There has been a lot of talk about the transfer of power in recent days with an emphasis on how our democracy allows for a *peaceful* transition. A brief look at world history confirms that violence often accompanied the transfer of power from one monarch to another. Yet, in the United States, political adversaries have been passing the mantle of power from the beginning out of respect for civic duty. In the Broadway musical, *Alexander Hamilton*, King George reacts to the first peaceful transition of power between Washington and Adams when he quips, “I didn’t know you could do that.”

The transfer of power is something we can do and something we are each called to do. Rather than talk about that transfer between kings and presidents, I would like to address the personal power and authority given to each of us as a child of God, how we use that authority in whatever position we hold in life, and in what way we transfer that power to those with whom we have been entrusted.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that until recent history, the roles of authority and power highlighted by Moses in Deuteronomy have excluded many based on gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and race. As one speaking from personal experience, I would posit that those who have been previously excluded have a deep appreciation for the need to hold the power entrusted in such a role with humility, reverence, and respect for all people.

Beyond the roles of authority and power addressed by Moses, Mark's gospel emphasizes Jesus' personal authority as he began his ministry at the age of 30. Jesus knew who he was, who God called him to be, and he makes no apology for it. His personal authority, distinct identity, and sense of himself was cultivated through the faith formation of his youth, the discipline of his studies, the openness of his curiosity, and the intimacy of his relationship with God whom he called Father. His personal authority facilitated the transfer of power into the lives of those he taught and healed and the evil spirits he quieted.

We, too, need to know who we are, who God calls us to be, and make no apologies for it. We need the kind of *personal authority* that empowers us to do the right thing in the circumstances of our lives, to suck it up when the going gets tough because of the people we love, and to rebuke and silence the voices that bully, belittle and threaten God's children. Every act of grace, mercy and compassion is a transfer of power and a victory in the struggle of good against evil.

Perhaps the most important transfer of power is the one that occurs within each of us as we grow into our own personal authority, distinct identity, and sense of self as a child of God. As parents and mentors we have the joy of facilitating that transfer of power as we intentionally nurture the faith formation of our children and youth. Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development helps us understand that doing what is right because it is the right thing to do is the destination of a journey toward personal authority that begins with doing what is right to avoid punishment and to obtain rewards, then transitions to doing what is right to gain the approval of others and to avoid censure by legitimate authorities, and ultimately ends with doing what is right to maintain respect within society and because it is the right thing to do. As we accompany our children and youth on this journey and embrace the role we have been given to love them and to hold them accountable, we have the privilege to witness the transfer of power within their lives, as they come into their own and know who they are, who God calls them to be, and make no apology for it.

Personal authority, civic duty, and moral integrity are essential for the transfer of power. In this season of transferring power through the ordination of church officers last Sunday and the proceedings of today's congregational meeting, may we continue the rich tradition affirmed by Moses. May we, like David, in obedience and solidarity, listen to the voice of God amidst the voices of the world. May we, like Jesus, grow into our own personal authority as we seek to live our distinct identity being true to God's call for grace, mercy, and compassion. These are the things that never die. Amen.