

Brother Clark's Sermon  
January 28, 2012  
All Saints Episcopal Church in Sunnyside, Queens

Good Morning! It is good to be here again. I am Clark Berge, and I am a member of the Society of St. Francis; most of the time I am traveling as Minister General, but when I am home at Little Portion Friary in Suffolk County, I like to help out in the Diocese when I can.

Today's Scriptures are teaching us about authority. In Deuteronomy God speaks to Moses saying he will put his words into the mouth of a prophet. Presumably this means that Moses speaks with God's authority. God does not give him blanket authority, however. There is a warning to the one who would speak for God: ..."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."

That is an extremely strict editorial policy!

But it serves as a welcome reminder that speaking for God, daring to teach people the ways of God, must be done with humility and honesty.

In the Gospel we see Jesus teaching the crowds and confirming his words with actions: he heals people and drives out an unclean spirit. As it leaves, the unclean spirit shouts out who Jesus is. Things happen when Jesus speaks, and this is a sign that he speaks with God's authority.

Paul is trying to clear up some authority issues for the Corinthians. The Corinthians got the message that idols don't exist and that each of them had knowledge of God in a direct and personal way. But it seems they were using this knowledge and the freedom from superstition in order to act in ways that were controversial, as well as destructive to the Christian community. One of the challenges in exercising authority is to find a way to bring people along with you, to build consensus. Even when I know I am right, if I do things that go against the conscience of others Paul is suggesting I have a responsibility to them as well. I have a responsibility to do the loving thing, and that may mean curbing my own freedom.

I think that to exercise authority lovingly means that I must find ways to be in conversation with the people around me. The authority that lasts in most communities is the authority that has the deepest roots in the hearts and minds of everybody. In order to discover what is in our hearts and minds we must talk deeply and openly with each other. This is the real challenge for leaders or so-called prophets. Imagine if the Pharisees had taken such an approach to Jesus. The ones who claim authority are the

ones responsible for creating the open place the opportunity for that safe, thoughtful sharing. Too often they get impatient and cut off conversation just as it is getting going. Leaders often don't like conflict so they quickly paper over differences rather than trying to listen for the voice of the Spirit. Especially in smallish communities like a parish or religious order or diocese—I even think it could work in the Senate if we could get everybody to agree to stay in the room and really listen with open hearts to each other—the challenge of leadership is to help the community to move away from polarities and find new ways of living with each other.

Paul is saying we must love each other. “Love builds up” he says. Elsewhere he says it casts out fear. Love endures forever. Knowledge puffs up, he says. “Puffs” makes me think of hot air, something soft and squishy. In other words we might have knowledge about something but if we are domineering or harsh or angry in our use of the knowledge most people won't bother to listen. Like Jesus' hearers we are more interested in the signs that accompany the words. We want to see signs that we are listened to, that the so-called leaders care about us and our ideas, do they have the humility to incorporate other points of view.

When we think about situations where we'd like to see some change—whether in the family or parish or larger community, change requires education: lots of it, two ways, open learning. In religious life we say, “If you are in formation you are in formation” meaning if you want to form people for religious life, you yourself are being formed and changed. You don't just “do it” to them, but new members mean the community must embrace and accommodate them—become a new community.

Once we have come to a common mind, there is a release of energy, an explosion of power. Several years ago the members of our household at Little Portion were all new to the friary. Everybody who had lived there over the past 20 years had moved, or died. At the time I was the only old timer though there were brothers older than me. We were following a house customary or rules that none of us had agreed to. I could see there was a kind of half-heartedness to our life, people were trying to get around certain rules. So I called a meeting. Before we met I posted a blank piece of paper for agenda items and asked the brothers to write down whatever they wanted to talk about. We generated quite a list. Then we met, for about 8 hours. First we were a bit tense and formal. I would announce a topic and they would all look to see what I would say. Gradually we began to trust each other, offering opinions. Over and over we discovered that none of us had the full answer. God seemed to have given part to one, part to another. As we talked we found a new way forward. We agreed on a slightly new pattern of life—outsiders never even noticed, but it was big for us who live in community with each other; though we did decide a few really big things, as I remember it.

After our meeting we went to a diner for dinner. The brothers were manic! “What’s got into you?” I asked. “Brother,” said the eldest, “in nearly 50 years of religious life, nobody has ever asked me what I thought about anything, ever before!!”

Healing happened. Old demons, little grudges, the sense that “nobody-cares-what-I-think” was driven out. We were all amazed

The words of God are entrusted to the community that is founded in love. Love builds up, says St. Paul. Love is both the standard we use to measure our thoughts and plans and it is the means by which we accomplish them. We have all heard it over and over again. But perhaps today is the day to hear it again for the first time. Love: it is a new teaching—with authority.