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Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
September 25, 2011  
Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32  
“Speaking for the Author of Life”

During the year I accompanied someone in a visit to a doctor. In the waiting room I flipped through a book found on a shelf there called, *On Doctoring: Stories, Poems, Essays*, edited by Richard Reynolds, M.D. & John Stone, M.D. The contributors are mostly artists like John Keats, W.H. Auden, Flannery O'Connor and Maya Angelou.

One expert in the book is physician, writer and educator, Sir William Osler, who lived from 1849 to 1919. He organized the Department of medicine at the young Johns Hopkins University and in 1904 became Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford University.

We have no doubts about his authority: a leader in the medical world and knighted for his contributions. For a leading scientist it's encouraging to read his statement that “Nothing in life is more wonderful than faith – the one great moving force which we can neither weigh in the balance nor test in the crucible.”

Another: “Medicine is learned by the bedside and not in the classroom.” That applies to most professions and is something that our intern Faith McClellan is learning here at Redwoods.

Pertaining somewhat to the gospel text today Osler writes: “Professors may be divided into four classes. There is, first, the person who can think, but who has neither tongue nor technique. Though useless for the ordinary student, she or he may be the leaven of a faculty and the chief glory of his university (These are the researchers). A second variety is the phonographic professor, who can talk, but who can neither think nor work. Under the old regime he or she repeated year by year the same lecture. A third is the person who has technique, but who can neither talk nor think; and a fourth is the rare professor who can do all three, think, talk, and work.”

Osler provides an entrée into the gospel text which is about religious authority. In a sense it's about the genuine article whether expressed in religious circles or in home, work or the classroom. Religious authority we will see talks the talk and walks the walk. It's about integration.

The chief priests and the elders of the people – the religious and civil authorities of the day – question Jesus' authority and Jesus questions theirs. The chief priests were the trained and educated professionals of the day and in a sense they had a right to question Jesus who was obviously knowledgeable and called a rabbi by the people but he was outside the established faculty.

The Greek word *exousia* means power and authority. In religious matters this is difficult to establish for an outsider. The usual methods back then were a direct appeal to God supported by miracles or an appeal to the tradition of the ancestors. Jesus was not a Jewish priest of the tribe of Levi and yet he powerfully represented and spoke for the tradition and he performed miracles as communicated in the gospels.

The chief priests and elders wanted to establish Jesus' credentials and so do we when we hire a lawyer, architect or visit a doctor. The book *On Doctoring* is impressive because every writer has impeccable credentials.

Was Jesus speaking for the author of life or was he all froth and bubble? Since John features prominently in this text we ask the same of him. In my thinking, John and Jesus were the Mozarts of the day: They composed symphonies at the age of six religiously speaking and they spoke the truth and lived lives that showed a genuine and brilliant relationship to God.

I'm the first to value the education and training we get as pastors because there is much superficial interpreting of scripture and theologizing and moralizing on complex issues by those who claim authority without sound education based on the best seminary training which we get at accredited schools like San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union.

There's an exception with Jesus. He was a star at birth. Religiously speaking, he invented the wheel, discovered penicillin and formulated the theory of relativity. We don't know what training he received except that it was outside the school of Levi. His knowledge of the law and of the prophetic tradition was impressive. He spoke it and he lived it. Many excellent and brilliant scholars since then have validated his teaching, ministry and authority.

Jesus challenged the religious professors and their divine authority after they questioned him. The priests and elders as he saw it were not living up to their calling based on a criterion that they rejected the righteousness of John. "For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him." According to Jesus, John came in the spirit of the prophets, he lived simply, and boldly called people into a right relationship with God and therefore he had authority.

It's interesting to note that John had previously questioned Jesus' authority. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one to come, in other words, the Messiah, the highest expression of one representing God, or should we wait for another?

Jesus replies: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." In this manner Jesus expresses the way of righteousness and in doing so establishes his power and authority as one from God.

In the end the gospel passage today is an attack upon those in authority. It is addressed to leaders who have forgotten the way of righteousness or do not recognize others who

have it. This refusal to recognize righteous people connects to the old hypocrisy of saying and not doing. They talk the talk but do not walk the walk. To believe John and Jesus is to walk in the way of righteousness in both word and deed.

Paul in the Philippians passage helps us understand something of what God expects of us. He writes: "If...there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others...(and)...confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God..."

"Lord" is a loaded word. We become members of the church when we affirm Jesus as our "Lord and Savior." Jesus as "Lord" means we accept his authority but it's not an authority to jump off a cliff. It's the authority to be compassionate, loving, peaceful and just. "Savior" comes from the root "salve" to heal. Jesus as savior enables us to be whole.

At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned that I accompanied someone in a visit to a doctor this year. I was there as comfort and support and I became a fly on the wall.

I watched while the doctor gently, caringly and insightfully took command of the situation. The diagnosis, options and health plan were superb. She was a model of healing. She even asked if the patient believed in God as if it was important for healing. She spoke of herself as a religious person.

Towards the end of the visit the quote on the cover of our bulletin kept spinning in my mind and I told the doctor: "Plato said that 'the wisest have the most authority' and I appreciate your wisdom."

The doctor seemed to have everything going for her in her profession. There was a balance of a real, true and hard-working professional and the wisdom that touches the soul. In the twentieth century she speaks for God. She is the "righteous" that was spoken and lived by Jesus.

She, like Jesus, Sir William Osler and Paul challenge us to be true to our faith and to live and speak with authority wherever God has called us to be. Amen.