

By What Authority? A Littlefair Legacy, 2

Mark 11:15-19, and a reading from Duncan E. Littlefair

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

In *The Reading From the Present*, there are two citations from sermons of Duncan Littlefair in the 70s. I will read only the last couple of paragraphs. In the first, he had advocated the use of the mind and the intellect and the intelligence in dealing with the problems that face us as a society, and then in the bottom couple of paragraphs, he said:

We stand at the dawn of a bright new era in life, the era of individuality and freedom, a time in which each person will be his own authority. We will be our own hero. We will find our own way.

We will not count on and be dependent upon established authority from outside and above. We will have the authority within ourselves.

We will be God in active form expressing the eternal and the infinite through ourselves. We stand at the dawn of such an era.

Amen means may it be. I would say Amen to that.

As I mentioned last week, I didn't think of much else except Duncan and his legacy, once in Florida I learned of his death and the request that I do his memorial service, and while I was trying to think about what to preach here, I finally just gave up and thought why not preach here what I really want to say to you anyway and do it in a reflection and a remembrance of the things that I learned from Duncan. So, this week and next week and then on Ash Wednesday we will be reflecting together on some of those core pillars of Duncan's own vision and faith which have been of such great impact to me and to the broader community. The central core of it all centers around this question of authority.

I'd never met anyone who lived with such a sense of inner authority as Duncan Littlefair. I have never encountered anyone who lived with such a sense of self-confidence, a confidence, an inward strength that simply was not dented or moved in any way in any encounter that I ever had with him or any experience of

him in any situation. He was a very strong, self-confident person who lived out of his own center and was his own authority.

There were those on occasion who would accuse him of arrogance and he didn't even defend himself against that. I've heard him say, "Well, if you call that arrogance, call it arrogance." But, it wasn't arrogance, for if you check the dictionary, arrogance has to do with an unwarranted claim to power or authority, and that was not the case with Duncan. There was no unwarranted assertion. What he was, what he believed, his vision, his understanding would be stated straightforwardly, no fudging, no fuzziness, set out there for you to hear, to agree or disagree, to acquiesce or to confront, and he reveled in all of it.

If you check the word authority, you find it is the same root as author which is to create or to cause to grow. Authority in the dictionary has a very interesting dual definition. On the one hand, I suppose most commonly, authority connotes to us that power to act and to enforce obedience. The police have authority to arrest us if we are exceeding the speeding law and so forth. That may be the most common sense in which we speak of authority. But, also in the dictionary, I read that authority can be the influence of an idea or a person that has gained esteem and respect. So, on the one hand authority is the imposition of power over another. On the other hand, authority is that which is given or ascribed to one who has earned the esteem and the respect of the other.

Of course, it was the second case with Duncan. He repudiated, he would rail against any claim of power to enforce. It was detestable to him, particularly in the Church or the religious life, that there would be one who would impose his or her views or positions on another, or on a community at large, who would have that kind of power to enforce conformity to a creedal affirmation or ecclesiastical discipline. But, he could not help being seen as an authority even against his protest simply because of the remarkable person he was whose leadership was an intrinsic quality of his being and widely recognized. The authority ascribed to him was the consequence of the respect and esteem with which he was held, to say nothing of the brilliance of his mind and his thinking. It was the incarnation of that vision and idea that caused people to see him as a figure of authority, but never did he claim it. Never did he plead for it. Never did he assume it. He was his own authority. He lived in about as complete and total a freedom as anyone I have ever known, as straightforwardly, as clear-eyed as anyone I've ever known, and it was his intention, I would say it perhaps was the center of his own ministry, to enable others to come to that same point of self-confidence, recognizing within themselves the source of authority for the way they lived, the values they held, the vision with which they lived.

The long-time friendship of Lester deKoster and Duncan began with them being debating partners. Lester, of course, was at the other end of the spectrum of Duncan in terms of this issue of authority. There is a very wonderful video of the Littlefair Years at Fountain Street, and Lester, on camera says, "I would say, as

espoused by Duncan, religious liberalism means that the person is his own authority. So, now I'm saying, I think, the religious liberal wants to choose among his authorities and it all ends up finally at himself."

Well, Lester, coming from his beloved crimped and cramped Calvinism, with his continuing assertion of the absolute authority of the Bible as the Word of God, was very sensitive to where the issue lies, and it does lie at that matter of authority, and this was a point of discussion many times at Duba's table because it really doesn't matter what topic you're talking about, if you talk about it long enough and keep probing at it long enough, it comes down to what is your authority? On what basis do you make that claim or deny that claim? At the table we were always very much aware of the fact that one was either speaking out of an adherence and a loyalty to, in this case, an ancient text, or one was speaking out of one's own being, thinking, feeling, as a volitional creature. So, when I saw that on camera recently reviewing again that video, I smiled at Lester putting his finger on the core issue, the matter of authority. And it is the key issue in the religious community as well as the larger community, and it has very practical implications for the way we live and what's happening in our society.

I generally begin Saturday morning reading *The Grand Rapids Press* religion section. I usually get energized to preach about something or other, and yesterday as I did that, thinking about this sermon, I went through and jotted down a couple of items. The lead story was of the messianic synagogue, people who are described as a small community locally with communities strung around the world. Not a large group, but the question was are they Jewish or Christian? There are people who believe that Jesus was the Messiah, but they continue in Jewish observances, which quite rightly they claim Jesus would have kept himself. As the article indicated, they are often criticized both by the Jewish community and the Christian community. The Jewish community said "You can't really be authentically Jewish if you're talking about a Christian Messiah, a Messiah-Savior figure," and the Christian community saying, "Why don't you just get with it and move on?" It looks like a wonderful community of people. It looks like they have a wonderful spiritual experiences and emotional fulfillment together, but the reason I noted it was that one of the teaching elders said, "It is pretty clear in the Bible that God intends to reestablish the nation of Israel."

It's pretty clear in the Bible? Well, I guess maybe it is. Paul really did think that. Of course, it is clear if you just take that ancient text, take that word that says that. But, you might say Paul was also thinking Jesus was going to come back right away and he was at the end of history and the curtain of history would soon drop. Don't you wonder, if he was wrong about that, he might have been wrong about this?

There was a similar kind of a statement in the article on the Southern Baptists who have now extended the ban on women as military chaplains. They've been traveling at breakneck speed backwards lately, the Southern Baptists. They

apparently have about twenty women in chaplaincies that this will not effect, but they will not extend it anymore because they have determined that a chaplain in the military do pastoral work, marry, bury, and so on, and actually if they do that, then they are in a position of authority and that would contradict I Timothy 12 which says that no woman shall be in leadership or exercise authority over a man, which I think is really a wonderful idea. But, I don't think it's going to work.

But, this is the point. These things have very practical implications. Take, for example, the question of the reestablishment of the nation Israel. If you are an orthodox Jew of a certain stripe, then you believe that, but you not only believe that, you believe that there are certain borders, certain parameters in the geography that have to be settled by Israel, have to be again Israel before Messiah can come. In that critical, tragic, explosive, violent situation that seems so hopeless in the Middle East today, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is over borders, and the settlement movement, the architect of which was Ariel Sharon. The present Prime Minister cannot dismantle settlements without violence of his own people because this is not for them a political question, this is a religious question. If they don't inhabit the land, Messiah cannot come. If you absolutize an ancient text, take it out of its historical context, out of its socio-cultural setting, you get that kind of thing. And so, the settlers who are living on those outlying borders, will die rather than be moved because it's a question of whether or not God will be able to act and to establish the nation in the ancient borders and bring in the Messianic Age.

Or, the Southern Baptist issue - how do you settle the question of the place of women and the gender balance on the basis of the Bible, which comes out of a particular culture? The Southern Baptist pastor who was quoted said, "Finally, the Bible is our guide and not culture or what everybody's thinking." I want to say, "You know what? There was a day when the Bible came out of a culture. A culture shaped it and what it said pretty much everybody was thinking, and what you have done is frozen a piece of history and perpetuated it down through the centuries while life continues to develop. And so, finally you have an ancient text that doesn't resonate at all with where life is down here."

It is a very tricky question and it has tremendous implications for the way we live today. You cannot, with this text, solve the burning sociological issues of our time. Look at how the nation is all upset now over this same-sex marriage thing. States rushing to constitutional amendments, people bemoaning the fact that this might challenge the sanctity of marriage. I want to say, "Why?" You can't get it out of this book, but it is this book that stimulates people and drives them to that kind of emotional response which can very easily turn violent and, at worst, divides the body politic and creates acrimony and accusation and condemnation.

I don't often like it when Hollywood celebrities have a microphone in their face. I wish they would do us all a favor and just be silent at such a moment, but once in a while one says something pretty good and Tom Hanks said recently, "You know,

in any evening when two human beings stand up and look at each other and say, 'I love you and I'll be lovingly faithful to you forever,' is a good evening."

If we would do as Duncan had always pleaded, if we would use our intelligence, if we would gather as much knowledge as we can, if with civility and dignity we could speak together and converse together and probe together, we could move together, we could take advantage of the light that has dawned upon us and continued to cause our corporate, community life together to be more reflective, rather than being pinched and cramped by an ancient text or an ancient institution with an hierarchy that is ruled by the priest. The implications of it are tremendous. The issue of authority is right at the core of the religious community, the religious experience, and the broader community of humanity, as well. This, of course, has always been the issue in the Church. That's why when Jesus came and did his thing in the Temple, whatever he did, it was a prophetic act and Israel had been inured with prophetic acts throughout its history. It was marked by that. The thing that made Israel unique was the prophetic voice, because every religion has a priesthood and priests keep the machinery going and the prayers being said and the rituals intact, and they are guardians of the tradition. They keep it all going and it is a very valuable function. But, the prophet stands outside on the steps of the Church and says, "Thus saith the Lord." Whatever happened in the Temple, Jesus was calling to a head his own challenge to that Temple establishment and there are all kinds of reasons for that which have been uncovered more and more in our day in fascinating studies of our time, social cross-cultural studies of that time. But, Jesus, in a prophetic act, confronted the established religious setup of the day and so the guardians of the traditions said, "What are you going to do about it?" The problem was, you see, Jesus had what Duncan had - when he spoke, people listened, because somehow or other, what he was saying resonated with their human experience.

In another place in the Gospels it says, "He spoke as one who had authority, not as the scribes and the Pharisees." The irony is that the scribes and the Pharisees had authority. They had the power to enforce. Jesus had that intrinsic authority that was compelling because it resonated with that which was down deep in the human soul.

They came and said, "By what authority did you do this?" In other words, "You can't just do what you want to do in this Temple because we have the authority to grant that privilege or to withhold it." Jesus knew this was not a sincere question about "Really, Jesus, talk to us, tell us about what's really going on with you. Who are you? What are you saying?" No, they were trying to figure out a way to fence him out and so he didn't play their game. But, he was the example of that prophetic voice.

Ah, you say, in the Hebrew scriptures, for Jesus, that was the word of God. Really? But, it certainly was filtered through the human person, and we ascribe to Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and Obadiah the word of God.

I preached a sermon in Coopersville when I got out of seminary, the ordination sermon for a friend of mine and I said to him in the sermon, “Jeremiah said, ‘Thus saith the Lord.’ You can never say that. You must say, ‘Thus hath the Lord said.’” Get the difference? I took away from him the immediacy of the address of the word of God. I was saying God has spoken and all you can do is say what God said. I was wrong. I was wrong even according to my own tradition. I didn’t understand it at the time, but I was wrong even according to good Calvinism. At the table, Lester would have said to me, “It’s the Word of God incarnate, it’s the Word of God written, it’s the Word of God preached and they’re all the Word of God.” That’s presumptuous. I can’t say my sermon is the Word of God. Duncan said, “Yes you can! Yes, you must!”

Oh, really?

“It is the Word of God according to you!”

That makes a difference. If I preach here and I assume that what I preach is simply my own stuff and not a word of God, I will preach a bloodless, lifeless, passionless, convictionless message that will move you not at all, and that’s what Duncan would detest. “You have to preach with a conviction; it is the Word of God!” But it is the Word of God as you understand it.

Lester would say, “It is the Word of God, period.”

To Lester, I had to say, “That’s arrogance and that’s dangerous.” Because if I can claim that my word is the Word of God, period, then I can send you out in the streets to do violence in God’s name, and it happens over and over again.

Oh, it’s tricky. It’s subtle, this matter of authority. To say that authority is coming out of my own center is not to say that it is simply a human thing. It is to say that the only manifestation of the Word of God is filtered through the human being and the human soul. But, it is the human being and the human soul, finally, that must take responsibility for that word, believing it to be a word beyond one’s self and yet never able to absolutize it.

Lynne Deur is publishing a little book of my sermons, and I had to re-read some of those sermons for her because she had edited a bit and one of them was from 2001, “Dropping the Salvation Fantasy,” a rather daring title for me. As I was reading that sermon, I was reminded again that I wrote down in five minutes eight points as to where I had come, from one place to another, and I took them to Duba’s table. I wrote them on this little piece of paper and kept it in my Bible ever since, because Duncan blessed it.

Just off the top of my head, I said, this is where I have moved:

- *from conservative orthodoxy to liberal openness,*
- *from supernatural theism to religious naturalism,*
- *from religion as verifiable truth to religion as experience of the sacred dimension of reality,*
- *from religion as dogma to religion as poetry,*
- *from religion as institution to religion as community,*
- *from religion as consisting of absolute truth to religion as emerging experience,*
- *from Christianity as exclusive to Christianity as one magnificent window opening on the holy and the sacred,*
- *from religion as salvation from damnation to religion as celebration of life.*

That was such an energizing, liberating experience to sit down and to write those things and to affirm that is where I am. I'm not trying to reconcile it, fit it into this book, or this institution. I value this. I love the Church. I know that without 2000 years of tradition and institution we wouldn't be here this morning. But, finally, this is where I've come. I know you couldn't run the Roman Catholic Church on this kind of thing. You can't even run the Episcopal Church or the Methodist or Presbyterian. But, you can run a local, independent community where every one of you is charged to live out of your own center, to be the center of your own authority, recognizing that as the emanation of that divine Spirit in us all, so that in a sense, as we look into each other's face, we look into the face of God. Or, on Valentine's Day weekend in that closing solo of *Les Misérables*, realizing that to love another person is to see the face of God, knowing that to know that and experience that is quite enough.

By what authority? That's the Word of God as I understand it.