

“There’s a New Sheriff in Town”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

January 31, 2021 – Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

Would you be willing to put your life in the hands of a guy named “Roaring Kitty?” Many have. Or at least many put their financial health in the hands a guy named “Roaring Kitty,” trusting his investment advice. Keith Gill, his real name, has encouraged, for over a year now, for people to buy and hold stock in the company GameStop, a video game retailer, that has a store right here in Stoneham. He has been pushing this advice online through his YouTube channel, “Roaring Kitty,” as well by posting on the site Reddit under a name that I shouldn’t repeat here. When he first encouraged people to buy GameStop, and not necessarily because the quality of the company or so many other factors that financial professionals consider when issuing such advice, it was worth about \$10 per share. This week, the value of the stock jumped all over the place, at one point trading for over \$500 per share, before dropping down to \$325 at the end of the week.

This upward movement and wild ride of this particular stock was good news and good fun for Keith “Roaring Kitty” Gill and the many other amateur traders that joined him in gobbling up all the shares of the stock and driving its price higher and higher. However, for many hedge funds and professional traders that had shorted this stock, betting that its value would go down and not up, the upward movement of this stock and all that caused it, was not good news or good fun at all. Many professionals lost bigtime while “Roaring Kitty” and many other similarly named amateur bloggers and chat board posters have become rich—at least potentially rich—as many are still holding on to their

shares, rather than selling them, hoping to drive the share price even higher.

So is the investment advice of “Roaring Kitty” and his fellow Reddit-posters the right advice to follow? Are the trading professionals a bunch of dummies that can be outwitted and outflanked by the blogging and posting masses? Who knows? Time will tell.

But this is sure: The “Roaring Kittys” and the chatroom-posters of the world will not be the last to claim to have a leg up on the pros when it comes to stock-trading or anything else really. Nor have they been the first to claim to have superior knowledge than others, even the pros. Since the dawn of time, people have been in competition with one another in claiming to be holders and proclaimers of truth and wisdom-authority figures that should be trusted and followed.

In the time of Jesus, there were many such competing claimants of such authority. In today’s lesson from Mark’s gospel, we read of one such group, the scribes, who claimed the authority of understanding their scriptures better than anyone else; they were, after all, Bible-teaching professionals! And there were others who competed against the scribes in claiming to be the sole proclaimers of truth and practitioners of God’s true ways. The Pharisees were one such group of leaders. They led mostly in the synagogues that could be found throughout the Mediterranean world, wherever communities of Jewish people existed. The message of the Pharisees, who taught that there was an afterlife in which all would be judged, was very different than another group mentioned throughout the gospels, the Sadducees. These were religious elites, who lived primarily in Jerusalem and taught in its Temple that there was no afterlife, only the acquisition of wealth and goodness in the moment. And we know of the Essenes as well, who were bands of separatists, who thought that the Sadducees, Pharisees,

and scribes were all a bunch of lying fools, and so formed their own religious communities away from the masses out in the wilderness areas.

But none of these religious leaders were ultimately successful in helping the people to feel that they were whole and healthy. People still longed to hear a message of God's truth that could set them free from the bondage and oppression of human brokenness.

And so when Jesus began his ministry and proclaimed that the day of God's deliverance had come, the people listened. They did so especially because he backed up his words with action. Jesus proclaimed a message of deliverance, and then he delivered people, healing them and casting out unclean spirits that dominated people and robbed them of the blessings of life that God intended for them to enjoy. To use a commonly phrase from the American west, where I grew up, there was a new sheriff in town. Jesus was a new authority that laid down a new law, or at least he helped people to see God's law in new ways that would liberate rather than enslave them. And this was unlike the teachings of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes, who maintained power over people by keeping them religiously boxed in with their rules upon rules and traditions upon traditions.

In our world today, we still need to hear the authoritative, liberating message of Christ; we still need to be healed and set free. For while there may no longer be Sadducees and scribes competing in their claims of authority over us, there is still a cacophony of voices, that noisily claim to offer truth and wisdom, but that don't really lead us toward enjoying more perfectly the blessings of life. Many of these voices, though they claim to lead us towards God, life, or prosperity, in fact, lead us not towards more these things, but away from God's blessings. Many lead to destruction.

So who is the authority that you should follow? Politician A or Politician B? Stock traders or stock bloggers? Dr. Fauci or one of the many TV doctors? Wikipedia or Encyclopedia Britannica? Somebody who goes by the name Q? Who holds the truth?

I believe that on the journey of life, we are all not just traveling on different paths upon the same mountain, all going up to the same summit. Rather, we are on many different paths on many different mountains and valleys and plains. Some of these journeys take us to beautiful, blessed places and others to places that are downright ugly and awful.

The path that God desires for us to be on, an upward way, is one of the true, beautiful paths. It is the way of Jesus, the one who calls the demons to no longer live among us and within us, but to come out of us. It is the way of life and love.

What is God's truth? What is God's way? Whatever leads to liberation, life, and love. This day, may you follow above all others the way of our liberator, Jesus the Christ, and so may you find more life and love within yourself. In so doing, may you bless the world with more of God's life and God's love. Amen.