

With the "Big Game" coming up next Sunday, it isn't hard for us to imagine that countless people will be huddled around their televisions to watch the commercials, as much as the action on the field. Advertisers will spend millions of dollars to attract our eyeballs and get us to open our wallets to buy their products. Many of the ads will be creative and memorable, and more than a few will also feature a famous individual to help push their merchandise.

Some of these celebrity "pitch" people get connected to companies and products over a long period of time. Who can forget when William Shatner hung up his Captain Kirk uniform and started hawking for Priceline.com or, if you're of a certain age, when retired slugger Joe DiMaggio moonlighted as Mr. Coffee? Brooke Shields rocked Calvin Klein jeans and Michael Jordan donned his Hanes underwear. They become so connected, in fact, that we remember them years after the products have gone into retail obscurity.

But as often as a celebrity spokesperson can help a product line, many of them have done more harm than good -- namely, the celebrity who goes off the rails by doing something, or saying something, dumb! Consider these cautionary tales: + Jared Fogle, who was featured in countless Subway commercials because he lost 245 pounds eating their sandwiches, was imprisoned back in 2015 for sexual misconduct. No surprise when Subway immediately dropped him as a spokesman. + Michael Phelps was pitching cereal for the Kellogg Company when a video of him smoking marijuana in 2009 got him bounced from the cereal aisle. Paula Deen was the darling of The Food Network until she was taken to court by former employees on charges of racial and sexual discrimination. Smithfield Foods dropped her as spokesperson.

These are just a few of the sad stories of spokespersons gone wild, which led to a bad image and bad press for the companies they endorsed. They were people who presumed to speak on behalf of the companies they represented, but their

behavior turned out to be an embarrassment instead. Of course, such behavior isn't limited to commercial endorsements.

The church has had plenty of its own high-profile pitchmen get caught up in scandal, and these individuals have damaged its reputation over the years. Those who presume to speak for God are sometimes watched even more carefully than celebrities; to see if their conduct and character match the message they are preaching. Discerning Christians, like discerning consumers, need to always be on the lookout for authenticity in those who would stand before them with what they claim to be the Word of the Lord.

Apparently Moses, in our first lesson this morning, knew that this was going to be a problem for the people Israel, so he spends a little time in the latter part of Deuteronomy offering up some criteria for the kind of people God calls to be his spokesmen, while warning the Israelites how to spot a fake as well. The question for them is the same for those of us who preach and those of us who listen to preachers: *How do you know the difference between a real prophet and a religious pitchperson?* How can you tell if someone is on the up and up, or if he or she is leading the people into spiritual bankruptcy?

In Deuteronomy 18, Moses offers two criteria for a real prophet: 1) The prophet will be like Moses, and 2) the prophet will be raised up from among God's own people. In other words, real prophets will speak and act in line with the law of God, and whatever they prophesy will affect them as much as the people, because they have been called out from among the people.

These are important distinctions, because they ground the prophet's words and work in the word of God, and in the community to which God has called them to serve. Unlike a celebrity endorser, a prophet should be well-known by those in his or her community before they ever receive the call. People will have had the opportunity to observe their public persona, witness their character in action, and

determine whether their message matches the Scriptures they have studied and discerned together in community. As God told Moses, the prophet will "speak to them everything I command" and whoever fails to heed that word will be held "accountable." The prophet will have a stake in the community to whom he or she preaches, thus whatever the prophet proclaims for the community will affect him or her as well. To put it another way, the prophet's word is less directed toward "you" and more toward "us."

Moses' warning is especially poignant in an age when it's possible for anyone to watch messages from a host of celebrity preachers who are personally detached from real-life communities by miles of wire and satellite signals. Many people in this day and age assume that if someone is writing books, or has a huge online following, he or she must be a prophet! The thing is, however, that a true prophet may not have that fat book contract, or TV show. Their people know them -- warts and all -- and their message is often difficult to hear, which means that their audiences tend to be smaller. With that criteria in mind, it becomes a little easier to tell when someone is actually being "prophetic" versus being a pitchman for a particular agenda. Here are a few telltale signs that you're probably hearing from a pitchman instead of a prophet:

First of all, these individuals will often be the ones to profit the most from their work! A pitchman is primarily in business for the benefit received from hawking a particular product or agenda, thus he or she is more likely to use their platform to manipulate others toward that end. When a person begins with an admonition like, "God told me to tell you ..." or "God gave me a vision," it should put you on high alert. History is full of those who have claimed to have a special hotline to God and have led people to destruction; while lining their own pockets or feeding their self-indulgent impulses.

Through Moses, God warns his people to watch out for those who "speak in my name a word I have not commanded the prophet to speak," because that word is usually their own. A real prophet, on the other hand, is more likely to suffer for the word he or she is bringing. Witness the trials of Jeremiah and Isaiah, John the Baptist, or the disciples of Jesus as just a few examples as witnessed in scripture. And who could forget last's week story of the Prophet Jonah? Generally if God calls you to be a prophet, God is not doing you a favor!

Second of all, a pitchman or spokesperson will often hold up, hawk, pitch, or try to sell you on other gods. In Moses' day that meant the idols of the Canaanites, but there are still plenty of gods to go around today. If your "prophet" is making promises about your financial prosperity, for example, that should be a major red flag! The biblical prophets were far more concerned about the poor than the rich, as was Jesus!

Biblically speaking, if you are financially prosperous, one of your priorities should be to share some of that prosperity. Any prophet that puts his, her and/or your financial wealth ahead of generosity is simply pitching a product and not the gospel. As Jesus put it, you can't serve both God and wealth; you're going to have to choose. Money is often part of an unholy trinity of other gods that include sex and power. When a prophet speaks a word that places wealth, sexual license, or a political agenda over and above the word of God, then you've got yourself a pitchman for another set of gods. And we don't have to read far into the Bible to realize what kind of destruction this can cause!

Next, a pitchman's character, or their behavior, doesn't always match their message! This one seems pretty obvious right? If someone is preaching a gospel that they're not living out, then he or she is a religious peddler and not an authentic prophet. Paul warned of such "peddlers of God's Word" and urged people to seek those who speak and act like "persons sent from God and standing in his presence."

Jesus warned his disciples against false prophets and religious pitchmen, who would come as wolves in sheep's clothing, but whose real character is revealed by their "fruits." The most authentic prophets are those who are vulnerable, whose weaknesses are known by the community, and who live in humility and with good character. Real prophets may not be the most eloquent speakers, but their lives speak volumes as to the truth of the message they proclaim.

Finally, a pitchman's preaching will more often than not have no results. Through Moses, God offers the people a surefire way to tell whether God has spoken through a prophet, or the prophet is speaking on his own: "If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; so do not be frightened by it." A real prophet knows the difference between his or her own Words, and that of God, and it's not so much about a prophet's predictions, as much as it is whether the prophet has rightly discerned the will of God, and whether the community begins to change as a result.

Of course....these are all good criteria to help us determine the genuineness of a prophet, but they can also be used by both preachers and congregations to evaluate themselves and one another. In fact, this morning I encourage you to take some time to think about the ways you are living out this model of a prophet in your own lives? And in a couple of weeks, when we meet for our annual meeting, perhaps we should consider the ways our congregation can monitor and evaluate the ministry God is calling us to do moving forward.

So how can we help each other be even more authentic and attuned to the word of God? By considering who will profit most from our work, by staying true to God and God alone, by seeking to live authentic spiritual lives, and by allowing God to work through us to make a difference in our community through the good fruit of our faith. Amen.