

Sermon for Sunday, July 7, 2024
Seventh Sunday After Pentecost
"On Being a Prophet"
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Decorah, Iowa

[Scriptures for this Sunday](#)

When I was five-years-old, I had my first experience of being called to deliver a prophetic word. A friend had invited me to go to Sunday school with her at her conservative Baptist church. My parents had stopped going to church, but they didn't care if I went with someone else, so off I went.

I don't remember much about the Sunday School lesson that day. But when I got home I walked up to my Dad and confidently announced: You have a black heart of sin because you are a smoker! I guess that's what they were teaching kids about Jesus in those days. After delivering my prophetic message, I immediately saw the flash of anger in his eyes. Then, in a very tight voice, he told me, "You are never, ever going to that church again." In that same instant I also realized that I had hurt my Dad's feelings. Now my five-year-old brain experienced a moment of profound confusion. Who to believe? The people at the church who said they spoke for God, or my Dad, who I loved and trusted? It didn't take me long to realize that my love and trust for my Dad were more important than what I had supposedly learned at church. In judging the condition of my father's heart and his soul, that church was not speaking for God or Jesus. They got it wrong and so did I. I was, at age five, a false prophet.

Our lessons this morning are about prophets. Narrowly defined, a prophet is someone who is called to speak God's word of truth – often to people who do not want to hear it. Ezekiel was called to speak God's judgment upon Israel and Judah, after they had been dragged off into exile. We may not immediately think of Paul as a prophet, but he was called to proclaim the good news of Jesus to the gentiles, a call which, at least initially, met with strong resistance. And finally, in Mark's Gospel Jesus returns to his hometown, but is rejected - A prophet is not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, Jesus says. Then he sends his followers out to share in his prophetic ministry of preaching and healing. And he prepares them ahead of time for rejection. Just shake the dust off your feet and move along down the road.

That episode in Nazareth was just a foretaste of the rejection that would happen later. Barbara Brown Taylor, in a beautiful Good Friday sermon writes this: Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God's will from their own. Powerful words indeed for us – living as we are in anticipation of the 2024 presidential election. But I digress ... I think the central question for us today is: What does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus, to be prophetic? To be the ones who bear God's word of truth into the world?

Well, before we jump out of our pews to assume our prophetic ministry, we better understand that God's Word of Truth is always measured by the One who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life." Jesus, God's living Word, is where we go to learn, over and over again, what God's truth is for us and for the world. And all that Jesus says and does, indeed, all of scripture must be understood through the lens of Love. Martin Luther identified John 3:16 – "God so loved the world ..." as the heart of the gospel. The night before he died, Jesus gave his followers the Great Commandment, that they were to love one another as Jesus had loved them. So when we read the bible, we don't pick out a verse that suits us. Let's use the example of Paul's admonition that women should stay silent in church, and proclaim that Paul's word is God's truth for all time. We test that word by looking at Jesus, who honored women's voices, uplifted their ministries, and included them among his closest friends. Scripture has many, many, words, and not all of them contain God's truth. Not all of them reveal God's saving love and mercy. Not all of them can be taken out of their context of First Century Palestine and be dropped into the year 2024 as though they told us the truth about God or about ourselves. That's why you're not going to hear me tell you today at the end of worship to pick a buddy and go out without food, or money, or extra clothes, and stay in the homes of strangers and preach the good news. We don't live in the cultural context where that is feasible. But I am telling you that in Holy Baptism, you and I and all of God's people are commissioned to proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace. That is a prophetic call. And we are all given a share of God's Spirit: the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of knowledge, the spirit of joy. The Spirit is our internal guide and compass to direct us in the sharing of God's love in the world. At the end of worship today, we will all be sent out to love and serve God and our neighbor. How that looks in our individual lives is filled with unlimited possibilities – as boundless as God's saving love and mercy for all creation.

Certainly there are those among us who have a prophetic call to publicly speak truth to power, which usually comes as a word of judgment. But that call is always exercised on behalf of others. It is the call to lift up God's justice by serving as a voice for those who are voiceless. For example, on June 28th our Presiding Bishop Rev. Elizabeth Eaton issued a pastoral letter characterizing the Supreme court decision to criminalize homelessness as "an injustice that we must reject." And, she reaffirmed our church's commitment to caring for the needs of our most vulnerable neighbors. While not all of us are called to speak truth to power, we are all called to be prophets in our very localized setting. Part of that call is to engage in the functions of democracy so that we can use our voice to promote leaders who will act, at least some of the time, within the vision of God's reign.

That vision is outlined for us in the Sermon on the Mount – in the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake ..." We heard that echoed in this morning's psalm. "Happy are those whose hope is in the God ... who keeps promises forever ... who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger ... who lifts up those who are bowed down and cares for the stranger." That is the vision we are called to live into. That is the prophetic truth we are empowered by the Spirit to announce in word and deed: That God's love and mercy are especially directed toward those in need. In theological language we call that

God's preferential option for the poor. It was first articulated by Latin American Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutierrez. It has galvanized entire church movements, energizing them for loving service in the world on behalf of the poor, and bringing needed reform to the church throughout the world.

I don't know where God is calling you to speak and live and act out the love and mercy and compassion revealed to us in Jesus. Maybe at the food pantry, maybe in our care facilities, maybe in volunteering for a candidate or writing letters, maybe in the hospitality of coffee and treats that enhance our connections with one another, maybe serving as Shepherds or on the Call Committee or the Congregation Council, maybe in mowing the grass or leading the prayers or singing in the choir or tutoring an English language learner ... I could go on and on. Wherever you are called, you can go out in the sure and certain knowledge that God is with you and will supply all that you need as you serve others in the holy name of Love.