

Sermon 7-4-21

Paul Purdue preaching

The Problem with Contemporary Prophets

Homecomings are not always easy, but most do not go as poorly as Luke 4, where Jesus' home congregation tried to throw him off a cliff. When Jesus went home, I imagine Jesus' hometown remembered with pride how twenty years prior, twelve year old Jesus blew away the nation's leading Bible experts. (Luke 3) On the Sabbath, Jesus worshipped in his hometown synagogue. Surely the rabbi was pleased to see Jesus and at least 12 guests in worship. It was customary to invite travelers to share a word of encouragement or lesson, thereby connecting the Jewish community that was scattered from Egypt to Babylon and Ethiopia to Rome. A smiling liturgist handed Jesus a scroll, pleased that one who knew the scriptures so well might share a few words. (Luke 4) The congregation sat back ready for some hometown blessings. When Jesus began to teach, the message surprised the hometown crowd.

They were surprised by Jesus' message and began to mutter amongst themselves. This in-group muttering may be the oldest kind of social media. *"Where did this guy get all this? What's the source of this wisdom? Well, maybe so, but what about the powerful acts accomplished through Jesus? Isn't Jesus just a carpenter? Isn't Jesus Mary's son and a sibling to James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? Aren't Jesus' sisters here with us?"* They were surprised then repulsed by Jesus' words and fell into sin. Jesus said to them, *"Prophets are honored everywhere except in their own hometowns, among their relatives, and in their own households."* Why did Jesus' household, congregation, and nation reject his message? Why do we resist the very words that might heal us and restore our nation? Mark Six tells us that very little healing occurred once the crowd was repulsed by Jesus' words.

Mark does not tell us exactly what specific button Jesus pressed hard enough to repulse the hometown crowd. In Matthew 23, Jesus waylays the church, but even the seemingly vanilla Sermon on the Mount stretches, challenges, and humbles us, *"You have heard it said since long ago, 'You shall not murder...but I tell you that anger leads to sin.' You have heard it said since long ago, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But watch out for lust (exploitative sexuality)... You have heard it said since long ago, 'Do not break your oath,' but I say unto you just say, 'Yes' or 'No'! You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' I tell you, if someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer them the left one. You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others. Forgive if you want forgiveness. Do not store up treasure on earth. You cannot serve both God and money. Do not judge. Give. Make peace. Seek God's kin-dom."* Even without Jesus' prophetic deeds of feeding people, offering free healthcare, or overturning temple exchange tables, the Sermon on the Mount should shake us free from any self-righteous delusion. Perhaps spiritual surety is the enemy of self-examination, faith, and spiritual transformation.

Why do we resist the prophetic word? Could it be that we struggle with the Incarnation? Is it hard to believe that God might be working in the messiness of our lives? Is it hard to believe God's word might come to us through someone like us who mispronounces words, who foolishly misspeaks like the Apostle Paul, or who does not know they have a bit of broccoli lodged between their teeth? (2 Cor. 11) Why Is it easier to embrace Martin Luther King's words when they are engraved below his 30 foot stone likeness nestled on our national mall? Could God still speak to us might through a 25 year old black pastor? Do we want a god who is so far above us, that that God is not part of the messiness of our lives? Do we prefer an inert God who once spoke but who is not speaking today?

I wonder if they came to church expecting a comforting sermon - a gentle blessing assuring them that everything was okay in Israel, their church, and their lives? Were they surprised that Jesus did not hold their hands and gently lead them beside the still waters? Did they crave the strange self-deceptive comfort of sermons that belittled and judged other tribes, theologies, or lifestyles? Were they shocked that Jesus spoke with spiritual authority and fresh scriptural insights, not bothering to cite trusted old theologians and already agreed upon traditions? What did they want in a sermon? What do we want? Do we welcome insights that stretch us or push us a bit off center or do our necks stiffen, our teeth clench, and our defenses go up when uncomfortable truths ask us to deeply examine our stand? (Matt. 13)

I've had physical therapy three times. The worst was for my once broken shoulder. At times beads of pain induced sweat ran down my back and words not expressed in church danced on my lips, as the therapist expanded my range of motion. Today, my repaired shoulder works better than the one never broken. The prophetic word pulls and pushes us off stuck places, it often hurts before it can heal.

One year into 33 years of marriage, I was working in my Dad's shop refinishing some furniture that Connie picked up at a yard sale. I found myself voicing some complaints about Connie to Dad. This was culturally fairly acceptable behavior in 1988. As I went on about whatever it was I was unhappy with, I missed the deepening scowl on Dad's face. The eloquent former master sergeant and head deacon growled and with an expletive, "You are #%@& lucky to be married to that girl!" Wounded, I stiffened my neck, gritted my teeth and snapped back, "Dad, you are supposed to be on my side." "I am on your side; you are just too dumb to know it." Raised by an abusive father, Dad never fully mastered how 'a soft answer turneth away wrath.' (Proverbs 15) However, Dad heroically broke the abuse cycle, and so I knew he loved me. His words knocked me off my self-indulgent place. At times when I am frustrated, I still remember dad's truth I am #%@& lucky to be married to Connie..Any truly prophetic word ultimately seeks to heal. Without the seasoning of love, any alleged prophetic insights slide into a cycle of judgment, acrimony, recrimination, and harm doing. Some confuse being prophetic with being a jerk, without love for even enemies, do not claim to speak for God. That being said: the truth, even if it is offered without Love, can offer us a new path. The prophetic voice invites us into a sort of holy wobble or wilderness that allows us to spiritually reset, but the journey is often not pleasant.

Prophetic words often come from unexpected people and moments. Did you hear God speak in Eric Garner's plea, "I can't breathe." If you are called out, do not rush to defend- pull back your pointing finger- do not judge the messenger, unclench your teeth, relax your stiff neck- examine where you stand.

Rev. Tom Laney asserts that there is no Biblical evidence of a prophet serving as a local church pastor. Pastors comfort and care for the sheep. Prophetic speech stretches us. It lights fires under us and within us. Holy words delivered by imperfect humans pull us into new insights and push over old idols. In Luke 5, the Bible experts and church folks mutter about Jesus, "*Who is this Jesus who insults God? Only God can forgive sins! Why eat and drink with sinners?*" Jesus answered with a parable about the prophetic voice, "*Nobody pours new wine into old wineskins. If you do, fermentation bursts the old wineskins. No one who drinks a well-aged wine wants new wine.*" Prophetic words bubble up in us, stretching out our fixed boundaries. Do we crave messages so settled, sure, and comforting that we do not hear truths that might push us off unhealthy, unjust, or untrue positions and heal us? Is the church in America so fixated on marketplace measurements that we have lost the narrower harder road that leads to life, resurrection, and transformation?

In his 1963 letter from a Birmingham jail, Dr. King spoke of our desire to uphold the status quo. King laments how so many of us are "*more devoted to 'order' than to justice; preferring a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice...*" We would rather have things stay in the same unhealthy sameness, than feel the unsteadiness prophetic change envisions. "*Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action (and prophetic speech) are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light! Injustice must be exposed- with all the tension its exposure creates.*"

The great prophet Jeremiah overstates our preference for religious comfort blasting out truth tucked into a load of hyperbole, "*all are greedy for gain; prophets and priests alike practice deceit. They dress the wound of my people saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. But, the Lord calls "change your ways and your actions; deal with each other justly, do not oppress the foreigner, the orphan, or the poor. Stop shedding blood. Stop trusting in your unexamined heritage and history. Look around; has the church, which bears my name, become a den of robbers?"* (Jeremiah 6-8) Who wants to ask themselves, "How am I a robber?"

Isaiah thunders "*Shout loudly; don't hold back; raise your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their sins.... Stop quarrelling, brawling and hitting each other violently. Yes, set free the mistreated, break oppressive yokes, advocate for the afflicted, and bring the poor into your house! But stop the finger-pointing, the wicked speech; open your heart and then your light will shine in the darkness, and your gloom*

will be like the noon."(Isaiah 58 paraphrase) Oh, how we love to snap back, to call out, to put them in their place and to demonize. If we can demonize them, then we do not even need to listen to their insight. Stop pointing the finger- end your wicked speech- examine the place you stand. Is your position unjust, unkind, unlovely, unrighteous or untrue? Stop judging others- first examine yourself.

So, on this July 4, I invite you to listen for prophetic words around you! Do not act too offended- examine where you stand. The prophetic word unsettles us. Holiness should undo us. Yes, it is hard to separate the holy from the profane, correction from judgment, truth from soundbyte, and palliative words from healing prescriptions. Still, Christ is with us in that struggle. So may Christ's love hold us so firmly that we can unclench our teeth, relax our stiff necks, unstop our ears, so that we might examine just where we stand and move off unloving, unjust or unrighteous ground. Jesus promises the truth (even in its ugliness) will set us free. (John 8:32) So let us not be afraid to look long into the mirror or wobble in spiritual disequilibrium for a bit. Do not be repulsed! Let the Word surprise and renew us, trusting God enough to soften our hearts, and sharpen our thinking so that God might heal us and use us to help heal this world that God loves. Amen.