

Prophets of Love

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 31, 2010

Jeremiah 1:4-10; 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13; Luke 4:16-30

All three of today's lessons concern prophecy in one way or another.

The verses from Jeremiah record his call to take up the prophetic office, and his reluctance to do so. The incident with Jesus at Nazareth preserves an example of the sometimes rocky relationship between prophets and those to whom they're sent. And Paul's famous words about love urge upon the Corinthians "the more excellent way" that he says is better than even the wonderful things, including prophecy, that he's just cataloged for the benefit of the body of Christ.

Prophecy is big for us in the UCC. Our identity is very much tied up with being a prophetic voice not only in our secular culture, but also in the Christian family itself. We pride ourselves on being out there in front on social justice issues, waiting for the rest of the world to catch up. We even have a page on our denominational website listing UCC firsts. Judge Samuel Sewall, a New England Puritan, wrote the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America, "The Selling of Joseph," published in 1700. When we ordained the Rev. Lemuel Haynes in 1785, we were the first Protestant denomination to ordain an African American. The same was true for women when we ordained the Rev. Antoinette Brown in 1853, and for lesbian and gay Christians when we ordained the Rev. William Johnson in 1972.

All of those actions were controversial in their day -- the last still is -- but they were taken because some of us believed that doing something about injustice requires more than simply speaking out; it requires acting out. True prophets don't simply come down from the mountaintop with the tablets of the law and say, in their best Charlton Heston voice, "Thus says the Lord." True prophets live out the convictions they offer to others because they recognize, as the prophet Isaiah recognized, that they are people of unclean lips themselves living in the midst of people of unclean lips. Prophets know that they are part of every injustice and wickedness they condemn.

You and I know, even as we struggle to be better stewards of God's creation, that we Americans leave the biggest carbon footprint on the planet and we are among its most voracious consumers and its most destructive polluters. You and I know that about ourselves. Even as we lift a prophetic voice on behalf of the planet, we know that we are very much part of the worst of the problem. And this self-knowledge keeps us -- or should keep us, at least -- from the sin of self-righteousness. We know the world and its problems are not made up of "us and them"; it's just us. All of us. Plants and animals and soil and air and water no less than people. We're all in this together.

Prophets, true prophets, condemn wrongs, but they identify with people. And they do that through love -- love of God first, love of neighbor second, and love of self third.

Love - not hate, not anger, not frustration, and not self-righteousness -- is the engine that drives all true prophets, because a true prophet, we believe, speaks for God, and we believe that God is love. A true prophet, therefore, always speaks for and from and about love.

And that's just where a true prophet's problems begin. Love, far from being the end of the matter, is really just the beginning. When you've said, "I love you," you're not ending the conversation; you're just starting it. You're starting a relationship that is very different from the warm coziness that Hollywood tells us a loving relationship is.

True love -- God's love, divine love in action -- as the great Catholic prophet for working people, Dorothy Day, put it, is a "harsh and dreadful thing." She was talking about God's love, complete and perfect for the whole world, and not the many partial and imperfect loves that we always try to put in its place. God's love is so different from what we call love it's almost a heresy for us to speak of them together.

And Jesus knew that. He knew about partial, imperfect loves, and he knew about complete and perfect love. He knew them and he knew that we are capable of living both of them, and that the vast majority of us prefer the former to the latter.

"You have heard it said," Jesus told his followers, "that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." That's partial, imperfect, tribal, human love, and all except the most emotionally damaged of us are capable of that kind of love. Jesus knew that and said it.

"But I say to you," Jesus went on, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. . . . For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you greet only your sisters and brothers, what more are you doing than others? Don't the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

That's a very different kind of love than the love we offer as Christian. If we're nice to others, give to charity, support our church, and perhaps even struggle for justice, we often let that suffice as Christian love.

But the kind of love Jesus calls us to, God's love, goes well beyond loving those who love us, need us, or appreciate our generosity or efforts on their behalf. God's love in action, as opposed to God's love in words, always brings suffering to the one who loves, and that's what keeps most of us from the true love of God. It's the suffering. We're all for the loving, but we want to pass on the suffering. And it's just there, Jesus says, that the gate becomes narrow and the road becomes hard that leads to eternal life, and he further says that there are few who find it.

It's easy -- and getting easier in our coarse and uncivil world -- for prophets to be angry. There are plenty of things in the world to make even modestly sensitive people angry. But anger, which is essentially negative, must never be confused with passion, which is essentially positive, and you can hear the difference in the way we use the words: we are angry about, but we're passionate for. Being passionate for justice isn't the same as being angry about injustice, and what the world needs now, as it has always so desperately needed, is people who are passionate for the realm of God. Not passionate about telling other people what they're doing wrong and how they should live their lives, but passionate about living the way of life of divine love -- the way of life, as

Paul so famously says, that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

When all of those other things have passed away -- our ability to foretell and to forth-tell, our ability to communicate globally and instantly, our vast learning that we have so often put to the causes of destruction as well as healing -- when all of those have passed away, what will remain is God, who is love. Not warm fuzziness, but that harsh and dreadful reality that so loves the world that it gives itself up again and again that we might live eternally through its death and resurrection. For that gift and to that giver be thanks and praise for evermore. Amen.