

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

# Prophetic Challenges

Ezekiel 2: 1-5

Rev. Dr. Galen E. Russell III

Mark 6: 1-13

July 5, 2009

*“Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.”*

Prayer: We affirm you are still speaking, O holy God. Please, won't you speak to us today through your word and these reflections I offer? Amen.

Back in the early days of my career in ministry in Salt Lake City, I got a first-hand experience of something similar to what Jesus experienced in Nazareth. A couple had come back to Salt Lake City after living in South Africa for five years, or so. They joined the congregation and became active for about six months. Nice couple. They were faithful in their activity and involvement in the church. But, one Sunday morning, our senior Pastor, Rev. Dr. Harvey Buer, felt compelled to preach about the atrocities and injustice of the apartheid (which means 'separateness' in the Afrikaans language) system that was in practice in South Africa at that time. In addition to apartheid, he also spoke out against companies investing in South Africa's apartheid system, and he declared that political prisoner, Mr. Nelson Mandela's imprisonment was unjust. At that point, Mandela was in jail about 26 years. Quite surprisingly to both Harvey and me, this couple rose up in anger, were highly vocal of their disgust for that sermon, expressed their sentiment that the apartheid system was the only system that could work among that "heathen people," that Mandela's imprisonment was justified (he was a radical dissenter), and that their investments were stimulating the economy. Turns out, the husband was employed by a large company investing in South Africa, and they didn't want to give up that source of their wealth, their privilege, and the benefits of the apartheid system. And so, in their disgust, they fired off a letter to Harvey and left the church.

We were surprised because the faith this couple portrayed was vibrant and lively, but it didn't include responding to injustice where it existed. It was all about 'what's in it for me?' The prophetic word in that sermon angered those folks.

Sometimes it's not easy being a prophet... sometimes the prophet speaks a word from God that is difficult to hear. Sometimes those listening to a prophetic word will become angry and will reject not only the word, but the prophet, too, and maybe even the hometown church.

In Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, his reputation has preceded him. Jesus comes in and speaks a prophetic word. It's not a prediction of the future, like Nostradamus; rather it's a word about the way things really are. The gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus opened the scriptures to the Isaiah 61 passage: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." So far so good. But, when Jesus says this prophetic word to the hometown crowd, "today this scripture has become fulfilled in your hearing," which was the way things really were, all holy heck breaks loose! People couldn't see him for who he really was or hear God's word coming through him. All they could see and hear was what they knew about him from his past. "And they took offense" at Jesus for uttering what sounded like a blasphemous statement about himself (c.f. Luke 4: 16-30). On the flip side, Jesus was amazed at their unbelief.

But regardless of the opposition to Jesus, did you notice how Mark describes what happened next? Jesus went about teaching, and he sent the disciples out by twos. In spite of the clear example in Nazareth of what might happen, they went out, preaching, teaching, telling people to repent, casting out demons, anointing many with oil, and healing the sick.

You see, even though there are obstacles, the message is that people who are about God's business must rise to the challenges and continue what God wants to do through them. And make no mistake about it, God's call is for all people who follow God in Christ to be about God's business and to stand for what God stands for... to love what God loves... to speak about the truth about the way things really are, real truths that are from God.

We are sent out into our worlds, our lives, our offices and places of work... we are sent out into the variety of groups, committees, and organizations in our church, all because we are following God in Christ, being about God's business, standing for what God stands for, loving what God loves, speaking God's truths. This, I think, is what it means to be prophetic. If we strive to do these things in our lives, whether people listen to us or reject what we offer, they will know that they were in the presence of one of God's prophets.

My encouragement for us is to be a prophet of God. Let me invite you to consider three prophetic challenges that I think will help us to be God's prophets in this world. Prophetic challenge 1) Be possessed WITH God and BY God. In other words, we have God in our hearts... but strive to give our hearts to God. Just like you have God, let God have you. Same thing with faith. We have faith; it's part of us, we possess it. But equally important is that we let faith possess us. Let faith have you.

We can't possibly be about God's prophetic business without God or without faith. As we celebrate our nation's independence, it is fitting to note that one of America's great prophets possessed faith in God but also was possessed by God in his faith. Martin Luther King, Jr. strove to be about God's business by advocating that all people should live freely with all human rights applied. He saw this stance in keeping with God's ways, and he knew it be true because God had his heart. Be possessed WITH God and BY God, and people will know a prophet of God was among them.

Prophetic challenge 2) Respond to your feelings of outrage when you see or experience injustice not with indifference, but with faithful determination to stand up for God's ways. This challenge is tricky... we first don't like to feel outrage, and when we do, we either don't know what to do in response, and/or we shrink back from the outrage, and/or we become indifferent to it.

But, outrage is exactly what fuels prophecy. The ancestors of our country were outraged at the injustice of not being free to make their own decisions. If they were indifferent to their outrage, if they just let it go, if they just shrugged their shoulders and said, so what?, we wouldn't be where we are today. It was their outrage and indignation which fueled their desire

to stand up for their independence. The now famous leaders such as Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, Hancock and the rest were all about the prophetic words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (<http://www.law.indiana.edu/uslawdocs/declaration.html>, retrieved, July 3, 2009).

May we have the courage to stand up for God’s ways when we see God’s ways being maligned somewhere. May we resist being indifferent to the outrage we feel when injustice occurs and someone’s rights are being abused or neglected. May we speak boldly and prophetically doing the work of God’s business in the face of injustice. When we do this, people will know a prophet of God was among them.

Prophetic challenge 3) Be the person who advocates for God’s peace, that biblical vision of *shalom*, which is the over-arching, all-encompassing vision of people living with one another with joy, love, justice, well-being, prosperity, all at work and all done in the light of God.

What a vision that is! It includes loving our neighbors, even the ones with the loud parties, or the ones that might have unusual colors on their house, or the ones that might have a trashy looking yard. Advocating for God’s peace among our neighbors means practicing hospitality in our words and actions. Such words and actions are prophetic because in God’s ways, that’s the way things REALLY are!

If we are about God’s business, we can let that peace begin with us. Like the lyrics of our next song suggest, with God present with us, we can take each moment, and live each moment, in peace eternally. Let peace begin with me, And when we do that, people will know a prophet of God was among them. Let’s stand and sing. Amen.