



“A Prophetic Voice”
Scripture – Isaiah 58:1-9a
Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 3, 2017

Can you be a true follower of Jesus and ignore people who are hungry or homeless? Can you be a follower of Jesus and be indifferent about discrimination based on race, religion or sexual orientation? Can you be a follower of Jesus and be insensitive to refugees fleeing for their lives?

Many congregations that hang a sign out front that touts: “Christian” are focused inward and fail to embrace Christ’s call to transform the world. Many individuals who call themselves followers of Jesus feel the winds of God’s Spirit in the depth of their being, but settle for a personal and private spiritual life.

If the church is to survive in the 21st Century, it must reclaim its prophetic voice. It must speak to ills in the world and shortcomings in society, and it must do all it can to nudge the world closer to God’s dream. The story of Moses liberating the Hebrew people from slavery to Pharaoh motivated Christians in the 19th century to smuggle slaves along the Underground Railroad. In the 1840s, the first women’s rights convention was held not in a public meeting hall, but in a church – Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Seneca Falls, New York. The women composed a “Declaration of Sentiments” that echoed the Declaration of Independence and contained this line: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men and women are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.” It was their religious conviction that God created all people to be equal that empowered them to challenge the laws of our nation. In the 1960s, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. critiqued our policies and practices from a biblical perspective and used that mighty and memorable phrase from the prophet Amos: “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

People of faith have had an impact on the trajectory of this nation because they have insisted on compassion for people in need and justice for all, and have been determined to work for the common good. But I fear the church is losing its voice. In too many congregations it has become at best – a whisper.

Many have left the Christian Church because they could see no discernable difference between the ethos of society and that of the church. Many pastors and members unwittingly swapped the values of Jesus and the prophets for the values of the prevailing culture. Over the past 40 years as society gradually increased its promotion of self and decreased the importance of humility, as it promoted prosperity at the expense of generosity, as it promoted privilege rather than service, as it promoted getting even rather than forgiveness, the church has come more and more to reflect society rather than being a spiritual station from which to critique culture.

One New Testament scholar writes, “For many Christians, it would *not* be a turning point in their lives if they decided to stop praying tomorrow and to leave off going to church next Sunday. Their lives would continue

according to the very same social rules, norms, and styles of behavior as before. Nothing would change because, long before that, their faith had already become inconsequential.”¹

That is a haunting observation to ponder. Is our faith inconsequential or does it chisel our character?

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live by a different set of values than those promoted by a secular culture. There should be a perceptible difference in the attitude, behavior, and goals of people of faith.

Although written 2,500 years ago, this passage from Isaiah is on target for the church today. The prophet is addressing the Hebrew people who have trudged back to their dilapidated houses after decades of exile. They have begun to rebuild their homes and reconstruct their community, yet God seems eerily absent. Each day is an exhausting endeavor. The people become testy and complain that their lives ought to be advancing because they are devoted to worshiping God by fasting and performing rituals of penitence. Yet the prophet Isaiah makes it clear that what they believe is faithful devotion woefully misses the mark. Not only is God unmoved by their religious rituals, God is outraged that they would entertain such a thought.

Speaking through Isaiah, God says, “This is the praise I desire: loose the bonds of injustice...let the oppressed go free...share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your house.”

A friend of mine shared this with me: Husband's Text Message to wife: “Honey, I got hit by a car outside the office. Paula brought me to the hospital. Doctors presently doing tests and taking X-rays. Severe blow to my head but not likely to have any lasting effects. Wound required 19 stitches. I have three broken ribs, a broken arm and compound fracture in the left leg. Amputation of the right foot is a possibility. Love you...” Wife's Response: “Who the heck is Paula?”²

It is easy to become distracted and overlook the main message. It is easy to overlook our core mission when we get too wrapped up in other matters. Isaiah reminds us that praise is thin, and faith is empty if our prayers, hymns, and sermons do not ignite our thirst for justice and our hunger for peace.

The Gospel of Luke reports that when Jesus preached his first sermon spelling out his mission, he quoted from *this* passage and Isaiah 61. Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.”

Poverty, illness, greed, injustice, and violence plague our planet. God urges the church to challenge cultural, political, and economic norms that are toxic to human life.

The church is called to critique society from a biblical perspective, but a prophetic voice is tepid if it is not backed up by action. We not only call on society to do the Jesus-like thing – which is just and merciful – but we show society what justice and mercy look like in action.

Do you remember the prayer attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr that is often called the Serenity Prayer? God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can; and the wisdom to know the difference. I would add: “God, grant me the conviction to respond in the best way possible given the situation.” Given the overall context and the numerous factors at play, God, give me the determination to take my best course of action.

There are too many Christians who believe their only responsibility is to pray, “God, this problem is beyond me, so please fix it.” That is tantamount to betraying Jesus with a kiss, because Jesus was constantly calling his followers to act.

Remember last week's passage from the Gospel of Matthew? Jesus separates the sheep from the goats. The goats are *not* the ones who failed to believe or failed to pray, but rather the ones who failed to *act*. "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me."

We cannot solve the enormous problem of hunger, but we can contribute to food banks and serve meals to people who are homeless and the working poor. We cannot cure a person who is dying of cancer, but we can extend compassion and let her know she is not alone. We cannot single-handedly lift a child out of poverty, but we can become a mentor. We cannot end the violence in a war-torn country, but we can help resettle refugees fleeing the violence.

It is so inspiring to see the ways that Westminster serves as a prophetic voice in word and action. To recall just a few examples, back in the 90s, when many turned callous toward those who contracted AIDS, our community of faith created Daughtry House to comfort those dying with the disease. While many declare the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a hopeless cause, we helped create Peace Drums – a steel drum band comprised of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teenagers who make beautiful music together, have become good friends, and serve as a symbol of hope in a land of conflict. We have found ways to combat the deadly crime in our city by sponsoring the Taking on Violence in Wilmington event where state and local officials heard the message of Father Gregory Boyle and local agencies were re-energized to do their part in stemming the violence. Within our own building, we house the Urban Promise after school program that focuses on Christian values and shows youngsters a pathway to making better decisions than dropping out of school, joining a gang, taking drugs, and opting for a life of violence. Four weeks each year we literally welcome the homeless by turning our Sunday school rooms into bedrooms and providing meals and encouragement. Years ago, our church family sponsored a refugee family from Viet Nam and today we support a family from Afghanistan. We are an Earth Care congregation that provides education on the environment and encourages all to do their part in caring for God's creation.

We do not labor under the illusion that everyone who benefits from injustices in society will one day wake up, recognize their complicity, and work to make things right and fair for everyone. Neither do we adopt a defeatist attitude that we can do nothing to nudge society in the right direction. We embrace what Jesus and the prophets proclaimed about God's deep, deep desire for justice for all, and we commit to doing our part to break the bonds of injustice and to spread the spirit of compassion so that God's will may be done.

What did God say through the prophet Isaiah? "Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!" If the church fails to reclaim its prophetic voice, I suspect God will applaud its demise because God wants the church to challenge the misguided assumptions of society, to expose actions that cripple and destroy, and to share a vision of a much, much better world – a world that is equitable for all and where people can dwell together in peace.

NOTES

1. Gerhard Lohfink, "Embodiment," *Called to Community*, (Walden, New York: Plough Publishing Company, 2016), p.17-18.
2. Jackie Taylor, "Musings" Newsletter of New Castle Presbytery.

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God — In the beginning, when darkness covered the face of the deep, you spoke and light illumined our world. You breathed life into every living thing and called us to follow, so that our light might break forth like the dawn. But we turned away, letting the shadow of sin overwhelm us.

Ever faithful, you sent messengers to us, crying out in love and hope, “Return!” We did not recognize them or listen to their words. So, turning to the angels, you said, “Watch!” as you sent Jesus to draw us into your embrace.

In him, your Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. In him, you came to proclaim justice, to heal the sick, to feast with the outcast, to love radically. In him you conquered death, and opened the way to eternal life. Glory to you in the highest!

As we gather at this table, we remember all you have done for us since the foundation of the world. With thanksgiving, we take this bread and this cup and proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord, even as we yearn for the day when you will come again to make all things new.

God With Us — In this season, you give us light that proclaims *peace*. So — knowing you come as the Prince of Peace — we pray for the places plagued by violence. You give us light that proclaims *hope*. So — trusting in your presence among us— we pray for those who dwell in darkness and despair. You give us light that proclaims *love*. So we pray that all may know your compassionate heart that summons us to this table. You give us light that proclaims *joy*. So we pray that this table reminds all your children of the feast that is to come, when we will sit at your table in glory.

Generous God — As we share the feast you have prepared, send your Spirit upon us. Enter this space, that all things ordinary might be used for your extraordinary purposes. As you fill us with this bread and this cup, fill us with your peace, hope, love, and joy, that we might go out to proclaim your good news to a weary and wounded world. We lift this prayer to you, in the name of the one who comes, and join our voices to offer the words he taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,
thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory, forever. Amen.**