

## **“GOD’S BOLD PEOPLE”**

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Amos 5:6-15, 18-24

January 29, 2017

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins  
Westminster Presbyterian Church

My friend just recently started a new position as pastor of a church that has been through some conflict. Shortly before her first Sunday, she learned that the folks at her new congregation were referring to her as “the healer.” Her words to me were “what could possibly go wrong?”

That’s kind of how I feel about the call to prophetic witness in the church and the world. It’s part of what God calls us to, and we hear that call through scripture and through our tradition and through God’s Spirit and the voices of men and women of vision.

One of the six “Great Ends of the Church” is “the promotion of social righteousness.”

Our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith mentions that among other responsibilities, the Spirit of God calls Christians to “unmask idolatries in church and culture” (Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA, 1990)

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes, “The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.” (Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*)

This work is sometimes characterized as “speaking truth to power,” although of course it can involve engaging both the powerful and those outside of power in the cause of justice.

Cornel West defines it like this: “Prophetic witness consists of human acts of justice and kindness that attend to the unjust sources of human hurt and misery. Prophetic witness calls attention to the causes of unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery. It highlights personal and institutional evil, including the evil of being indifferent to personal and institutional evil.” (Cornel West, quoted in *Prophetic Preaching: A pastoral approach*, by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale).

Over the years, people of faith have been moved to prophetic witness for such diverse reasons as religious freedom, concern about alcohol abuse, opposition to slavery, the right to vote, corruption in government or church, and segregation.

Today we face a whole host of issues and needs and problems in our world, about which many Christians feel compelled to take a stand (although not always the same stand): war, gun violence, the death penalty, reproductive rights, bullying, the environment, refugees, racism, education, poverty, pornography, end of life issues, human trafficking, ethics in public life... the list goes on.

What could go wrong?

Well...

We might make people angry.

They might hurt us, or reject us.

We might be misunderstood. Cause rifts in the family, or the church.

There's bound to be a cost, when you rock the boat.

We might mistake our own grievances, our own agendas, for God's.

We might make a bad situation worse.

Though we have right on our side, we might choose the wrong methods – for example, we might let anger take over.

We might get burned out, overwhelmed, desensitized ...

We might, in our zeal for justice, lose sight of joy, beauty, nuance, or God's grace.

Or... we might be wrong. Not as well-informed on the issues as we need to be. Ignorant of history. Not thoroughly grounded in the scriptures.

We might not have considered other points of view. We might not have listened carefully enough to the perspectives of the people we're trying to speak up for.

What could go wrong? A lot. But we still risk it. We still know that this is a part of what faith calls us to do.

Why do we do it? Why take those risks? Lots of reasons, but it boils down to scripture, theology, and compassion.

Scripture is our bedrock. When somebody asks me why we talk about social issues (or politics or controversial topics or what have you) when we ought to just stick to the Bible, all I can do is say that it's because of... *the Bible*. Social justice... right relationships... concern for the needy... protecting the vulnerable... speaking the truth with conviction ... it's all in there. It's especially evident with the prophets, tasked with speaking out on God's behalf, to their people and their leaders. The issues they confronted included bribery and corruption, unequal justice for rich and poor, idolatry, greed, oppression, and indifference to the plight of the poor and vulnerable. But God's desire for justice, and God's presence with the vulnerable, is a theme throughout scripture. We see it in Joseph, in Moses, in Mary's words, in Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God as good news to the poor. It's no wonder that some of Martin Luther King Jr.'s most memorable phrases are biblical ones: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:12)

Amos in particular addresses this connection between faith and justice in the wider society. The message he conveys of God's anger is not just about his society in general – the greed of the wealthy, the corruption of authorities, the exploitation of the poor – it's also directed specifically at the religious community ...for their indifference to those issues. God says through the prophet, "I hate your festivals, I take no delight in your assemblies, I will not accept your offerings." Those are strong words! What it boils down to is that worship and religious rituals, songs of praise, generous offerings, and all the rest mean nothing in God's sight, as long as justice and compassion are neglected.

But, says Amos, on God's behalf: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an overflowing stream."

Our reformed theological tradition also guides our commitment to prophetic witness. It frames our understanding of the world in such a way that prophetic witness is almost a given. Our core belief in the sovereignty of God contains the conviction that every part of life, every part of the world, is subject to God and matters to God. We don't, fundamentally, draw a line between what is sacred and secular. A Presbyterian document on this subject says that Christians "seek to witness to God in public life, because God is there." ("Why and How the Church Makes a Social Policy Witness" p. 15)

And we accept the responsibility of prophetic witness because our scripture and our tradition and above all God's grace have taught us compassion. They have taught us to love truth and justice and peace, too, but it's compassion that really moves and sustains a commitment to social witness, because it's compassion that helps us understand that "issues" are not abstract; they are real struggles, real needs, real tragedies in real people's lives.

We are blessed to have a host of people we can look to as examples of prophetic witness: Martin Luther King, Jr., of course, but some others that come to my mind: Sojourner Truth, who spoke boldly about what it was like to be a black woman in the time of slavery; Rachel Carson, who wrote eloquently of the harmful effects of indiscriminate pesticide use; Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who steadfastly resisted apartheid in South Africa; the rock star Bono, who takes occasions like a National Prayer Breakfast to tell politicians that they must do more to address hunger. People of faith, all of them, and all prophets in their own different ways. I bet you can think of others.

We might not see ourselves as being like any of those folks in ability or influence. We might not have opportunities or gifts for public speaking, and we might not be able to march, or organize, or get the ear of powerful people.

But we can still be people who bear prophetic witness to God's desire for justice, peace, and compassion in the world. And I'm convinced that we are living in a time when this witness is more necessary than ever.

We can write or call lawmakers, or local leaders, or the newspaper. We can be part of groups like ISAAC or Bread for the World, that offer a way to join our voices to advocate for the needs of our community or of hungry people.

And we can be the voice of God's compassion wherever we are. We can speak up for the needs of people who are being overlooked. We can make efforts to see that people aren't excluded. We can have conversations that encourage others to consider what justice means.

It's important for us not to stay silent when people make racist jokes or demean women or mock "political correctness" or stereotype the poor, because silence is acceptance and consent. People need to know that there are Christians who are not judgmental, not anti-muslim or anti-gay or anti-immigrant, not anti-science. Who will let them know that if we don't?

To be effective, it's important to make real efforts to understand issues, especially from the perspective of the vulnerable, the disenfranchised, the "other." Question what you think you know. Read a historical perspective. Ask, how does this fit with the witness of scripture? Ask, what would Jesus say?

I appreciate Cornell West's assertion that prophetic witness is *acting and* speaking .... His point is important. Words matter, but words are not enough. What we do matters, too. How we treat everyone matters. Our integrity matters. Our willingness to roll up our sleeves and help matters. Our giving matters.

We must persevere and not be discouraged even if we seem to make little headway. We have to reject apathy as incompatible with faith. We need to remember the people who have come before us and honor them by continuing their work.

For this work - God's calling - of prophetic witness, I believe we need both humility and boldness.

First, humility: Jeremiah's "call story" isn't the only one in which a prophet hears God's call with some ... reluctance. I used to think the message of these stories was "don't be hesitant, you can do it" but now I wonder if these stories don't suggest that hesitancy is a good place to start out. Maybe it's a good thing to understand that we are imperfect spokespersons for God's vision of justice – not just because we are limited in what we know and what we can do, but also because we are ourselves enmeshed in the world's injustices and brokenness. We are not innocent. So it's good to begin from the realization that we all need grace, and that we can't go forward without God's help and strength.

To claim that message of justice, we also need to find courage to get us past fear, and discouragement, and apathy. I believe that courage depends on hope. Walter Brueggemann says that from a Biblical point of view the prophetic message is always two-fold: both a challenge to the status quo and a word of hope. So we have to remember what Martin Luther King, Jr. said: "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We have to remember all the faithful people who have helped us to understand a little better what justice means. We have to remember that the vision is from God, and so is the strength to keep walking toward it.

Don't feel very courageous? I don't either. I'm not wild about making sacrifices. I don't like to make people mad. I don't even like to make phone calls. But a friend reminded me this week that "Courage is like a muscle; it is strengthened with use." We don't have to start big; we just have to start. And believe that, as Jeremiah was promised, God will be with us, will give us the words, will guide us, and will deliver us.

"Let justice roll down like waters." Let it roll down on us; Let it roll down on everyone. Amen.

#### Resources:

*Prophetic Preaching: A pastoral approach*, by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, 2010

"Why and How the Church Makes a Social Witness Policy Statement," A report adopted by the 205<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 1993.

*We Get to Carry Each Other: the gospel according to U2*, by Greg Garrett