

A Not-for-Prophet Sanctuary

Luke 4:16-30

Years ago, when I was a youth growing up in the church where my father was the pastor, I recall a less-than-stellar moment in my adolescence. It was Youth Sunday—the annual programming mistake my father and the church deacons would make to accommodate the younger generation. Those were the days when the ideal image for youth ministry was Pat Boone in a turtleneck crooning Kumbayah, but what you got in the pulpit was the preacher’s kid, who had shoulder-length hair and a recalcitrant attitude. Since the entire number of teens in the church totaled under five, the choices were few and the results were predictable, year after year.

On this particular Youth Sunday, I was the chosen speaker for my generation. Since I had already done it the year before in more conventional fashion, this time around I decided to dazzle them with one of my own musical compositions—a rendition of a song that I had written under the influence of adolescent hubris and three shakers of stupidity. At the time, I thought it was something akin to Bob Dylan, with a slight influence from Pink Floyd, but that was more in my mind than in reality. My production that morning was certainly esoteric, probably bordering on strange and inappropriate, but I was convinced it was prophetic and meant as a stinging word of challenge from my generation to all those sleeping in the pews.

After I had finished, I recall thinking to myself that I had really gotten my message across; everyone sat there in stunned silence, shaking their heads, with clear expressions of concern on their faces. Not being particularly astute at the time in reading human behavior,

for the remainder of the service I basked in the ridiculous notion that I had just said (or in this case sung) something profound and powerful that shook them and their worldviews to the core and would radically change the church forever!

However, that perception quickly dissipated after the service when my brother, Peter, came up to me laughing and mocking me playing my guitar, and my mother scurried over and uttered her usual, “Paul, you numbskull, what were you thinking? Didn’t you go over that with your father?” The short answer was No, I thought I knew better; but the lasting memory was, it’s much harder to be a prophet from the pulpit than it appears!

Over the years, of course, I’ve had similar lessons to learn in other ways; the prophetic presence isn’t assured merely because you can scold a congregation from behind a pulpit. A preacher’s own hubris and ego can get in the way of actually conveying a prophetic word from a text or in a situation. The proverbial call of ministry “to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable” depends on wisdom and discretion, as much as it does inspiration. To know the difference between being a pastor and being a prophet and when to be either or both is part of learning how to do this craft.

Parishioners and preachers, of course, often are looking for different things during weekly times of worship. Parishioners come for an hour or two away from the normal stresses and upsets of life—a quiet time of reflection after a harried week of hassles and heartaches. A little music, a little prayer, a little fellowship, and a few comforting words from the pastor to help put life back into perspective is just

what the soul needs before one presses onto another stretch of work and family dramas.

Preachers, on the other hand, see it differently. We have been gearing up all week for the opportunity to express to a captive audience our personal opinions on virtually any topic! Whether or not we have any expertise on what we're saying is secondary to the assumption we can at least make it sound as if God agrees with us! But that doesn't mean one's preaching is prophetic or makes as powerful an impression as one thinks.

As life often shows, the ones who are usually true prophets among us are not the most obvious candidates. For it isn't scolding the masses from behind a pulpit that makes for a prophet; it is the carrying out of prophetic deeds in daily life and in times of crisis—actions that challenge the powers that be and unnerve the status quo—which then mark the prophets among us. It's the *deeds* that matter—prophetic actions that break through the accustomed conventions that force us to rethink what we're doing and how we're doing it and who we're doing it to! It's the deed-doers, more than the pulpit-pounders, who are the prophets that live among us and who have made their mark on human history.

The truth is, sanctuaries are not made for prophets. Sanctuaries are meant to be places of refuge and respite—a sacred space to gather one's bearings and wits—where one rests a weary spirit. There's a very good reason why we have sanctuaries in order to be protected from that which harms us in the world, that provide an environment of safety and security and shelter. Unfortunately, sanctuaries haven't been that for many people, but that doesn't deter

the need we have as spiritual refugees for a gathering place to restore our hearts, minds, and souls. Sanctuaries allow us to make Sabbath—to find space in our harried existence to reclaim our God-given selves. They are meant for retreat, for recovery, and for renewal. We need sanctuaries and Sabbaths to provide salve and healing for the bruising our spirits take in daily life. They are places to comfort the afflicted.

However, when it comes to afflicting the comfortable, that's a different story. Prophets, as a rule, don't retreat from the world, they take it on. They make their greatest impact on settings where conflict is inherent and perhaps inevitable—where people are restless and upset—an environment where they are not in control and where stirring things up is intended to awaken and challenge people to do the right thing in a particular set of circumstances. The righteous message is conveyed through what one says, but the greater impact is made by what one does. That's important to recognize, since we tend to highlight the ones who can stir us by words alone. Sometimes the most memorable and prophetic actions are carried out without words being spoken and only a defiant and resilient spirit evident to those who would otherwise intend to run right over you.

One example that comes to mind for me is the image of the lone anonymous man standing in front of a line of armored tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989. That was a powerful prophetic moment. Another was the determination of Rosa Parks to remain seated in the front of the bus. Or more recently, the stubborn resolve of Liberian women encamped outside of the presidential palace in Monrovia a decade ago which initiated a series of events that ended a bloody civil

war and forced Charles Taylor from power. Prophetic moments and prophetic people.

Mahatma Gandhi's 248-mile Salt March in 1930 is yet another example of a prophetic act that served as a catalyst for change—in this case, ending British imperial rule in India. Likewise, Susan B. Anthony, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Aung San Sui Kyi, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero, and others, in their respective countries, acted prophetically to help turn the tide of history. In most cases, the collective memory is not of the words that were spoken, but of the actions that were taken that created the tipping point for social and political change. That's the prophetic legacy.

Yet, along with these larger-than-life prophets of history, lesser known prophets make their impact on us as well. These are ones who won't make headlines, or be quoted by the media, but are those we respect and admire—those who have shown us a better way to act or to be at important times in our lives. These “minor prophets” may have met us at moments of soul-searching or found us in a life-crisis and stood out, leaving a significant impression on our consciences and on our souls. They inspire us to take right actions in a time of discernment or confusion; they help us find our way. As personal prophets, they may well be the ones who afflict us when we were too comfortable!

All of this has bearing on our text for the day from Luke's Gospel, which is an account of when Jesus returned to his home synagogue in Nazareth and then left his neighbors and friends enraged and upset with his prophetic proclamation. It's an important

story for it reveals what Jesus thought about this role and mission, and why Jesus could not remain at home in Nazareth to fulfill his divine calling and why he could not stay cloistered forever in a sanctuary.

At first glance, it's easy to understand why Jesus' hometown became so angered and upset at his proclamation. As I learned early on, it's hard to be perceived as a prophet with spiritual authority to an audience that already knows you in more personal ways. They know whose kid you are; they're already familiar with your story and personality and quirks (and your lousy songs!). The focus is on the person they know instead of the message you bring. Relationships are such that what is said is filtered through how you know the person, rather than how they speak to your heart.

In Nazareth, Jesus was merely a local man—a common laborer like most of them—certainly no more deserving of respect than what he had shown them by not remaining with his own kinfolk and friends. Who was he to come back home and make himself out to be more than he was perceived to be?

But personal issues aside, the real trouble existed elsewhere. In that sanctuary, Jesus' neighbors and kinfolk wanted him to take Isaiah's prophetic words of God's great deliverance and apply it to them. In their view from the pew, *they* were the poor needing good news; *they* were the captives seeking release—the blind needing sight—the oppressed yearning to be free! They wanted him to preach the word and tell them that God was on their side and was going to proclaim favor *to them!*

That's why they were there in the sanctuary! They were there for their own needs! That was their retreat. They expected God to comfort them in their afflictions and to heal their wounds—to make their world better for them—to renew their lives and to replenish their souls. They were the ones in the sanctuary seeking God's help for their own troubles, and then Jesus came and pointed them *elsewhere!*

Prophets are not accepted in their own hometowns for the very same reason sanctuaries are usually not for prophets. Pastors are the ones who soothe the souls of those in the sanctuary; prophets are the ones who are on the outside and lead the effort to take on the world away from the sanctuary. Prophets make their impact because they unmask our tribal self-interests and personal preoccupations and direct us toward others who are suffering greater oppression and poverty and blindness and spiritual weariness than those who have a sanctuary to retreat to. They are the ones who find themselves in the crosshairs in a world of violence because they go to the places of crisis to do prophetic deeds and actions, instead of always retreating behind the security of a sanctuary pulpit!

Prophets are the ones who keep those of us in the sanctuary focused outwardly, away from our own self-preservation and toward those with whom God is calling us to be in solidarity. You see, prophets aren't meant for sanctuaries, just like sanctuaries aren't made for prophets. Yet, in this world, in these times, and in so many places, we need *both*.

To comfort the afflicted—that's the pastoral role, following the example of Jesus as the good Shepherd. It's why we need sanctuaries.

Whereas, to afflict the comfortable—that's the prophet's mantle in the daily world, following the example of Jesus the troublemaker. We won't find prophets in our sanctuaries as a rule—they are outside doing their work, taking on the challenges of the world, beckoning us to join them. That's where our faith and moral courage count for something good.

There's a need and a purpose and a time for both the pastoral and the prophetic. We need them both. That is what makes our faith in God, our following of Jesus, and our witness to the Gospel so profoundly and poignantly compelling.

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3 February 2013