

“The Prophethood of All Believers”

Numbers 11: 11-16, 24-29, Mark 9: 38-41

The Rev. Dr. Andrew L. McDonald

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

Saint Paul, Minnesota

September 30, 2018

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

One of the great transformations in Christianity came with the Protestant Reformation. Prior to that, if you wanted to connect with God, you needed a priest. The priests were the ones with access. In the Bible, it was the Levites and they had special access to God.

Martin Luther discovered the Bible calls the whole people of God the Priesthood of All Believers. In other words, we all have access to God. We lift up our prayers, our worship, our sacrifices, and God pays attention. God listens to us. God speaks to us.

The Priesthood of All Believers changed the way Christians thought about themselves, and the way they connected with God. But there are other passages that speak about our Identity as the God’s people. The ideal that we would embody not only the Priesthood of All Believers but just as important: the Prophethood of All Believers.

What does it mean to be a prophet? The prophet Elijah is mentioned into today’s lectionary reading: When we hear the term, we usually think of someone who can tell the future. Soothsayers. Augers. Psychics. Newspaper columnists. Weather forecasters. Stock Brokers. Prophet is someone who changes people’s minds.

Recently I was hiking in Alaska -- a Lifelong dream. Just as we start hiking, it starts raining. It’s raining on my lifelong dream. Until my hiking companion, George says, “Our old track coach would make us run in the rain. He’d say, “Come on boys! Rain is just liquid sunshine!” Every time one of us would start to grumble about the rain, He’d say, “It’s just liquid sunshine.” He changed my mind about the rain. That’s a good way to start to think about prophets: a prophet is someone who changes people’s minds.

I was driving out in the country this week. On that beautiful four lane highway between here and Rochester. Farmland is abundant. One farm with hay bales the length of 3 football fields, under white plastic sheets. The farmer had painted a message for everyone passing by: “Without farmers, you would be hungry, naked and sober.” A prophet is someone who changes people’s imagination.

Abraham Lincoln changed the country with his words in the Gettysburg address when he said, “A new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men were created equal.” He changed people’s minds: that was a prophetic imagination.

Martin Luther King, along with his social action, changed people's minds when he said, "I have a dream, deeply rooted in the American dream, I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

Dr. King changed people's minds: he changed their imaginations about who we are as a nation. That is the prophetic imagination. Not predicting the future: but seeing the possibilities of the future, And helping us feel it today.

Flannery O'Connor's classic story: "Revelation," opens as Ruby Turpin and her husband Claud enter a crowded doctor's waiting room. As they wait, Ruby looks around the room, and places every person in the room, into categories of who is the least socially acceptable, and who is more socially tolerable. Ruby feels superior to them all.

It is just as she quietly has judged them all, that a collage age girl, Mary Grace, who had been reading a book titled: "Human Development" hurls the book she has been reading and nails Ruby Turpin just above the eye. "Human Development" indeed.

Mary Grace lunges across the table, and grabs Ruby Turpin by the throat. Mrs. Turpin gasps and says: "What you got to say to me?" Just before Mary Grace passes out from the sedative they give her, she says to Ruby Turpin: "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."

Mrs. Turpin finds this comment very unsettling, and she wonders if it may have been a message from God, who may be trying to intervene in her life. Hating the notion, and still upset, she returns home. While hosing down her own hogs in their sty and obsessing on what she is terrified may be a true message from God, Mrs. Turpin rages. She scolds God, demanding to know how she could possibly be herself (the upstanding, polite, good Christian she sees herself as) and a "wart hog" at the same time. As the sun sinks low in front of her, she angrily echoes Job's question to God: "Who do you think you are?"

At that point the rays of the setting sun become a kind of road from the earth to the sky. Ruby has a vision of redeemed souls winding their way to Heaven. At the front of the line are all the people that Ruby Turpin judged as inferior and unworthy. They are hooping, laughing, singing, and dancing their way into heaven.

This whole long line in joyful procession. At the end of the procession, Mrs. Turpin sees all her proper, dignified Christian friends, (behaving like Presbyterians) and she sees her husband Claud and herself, all looking shocked and altered to be entering heaven with, and behind as the last become first, and the first become last.

That is my favorite Flannery O'Connor story. "Revelation." It is about a change in perception. Of course, you know who the prophet is in the story? Mary Grace. To hurl a book at someone, (that's a metaphor, please do not do that) -- to hurl an idea at someone -- an idea that changes their whole way of seeing and thinking about themselves, of seeing and thinking about society.

The Bible comes hurling at us and makes us aware, again and again, our consciousness has been hijacked by the world's idolatrous ways of thinking and speaking. We end up weary, demoralized and domesticated.

We end up in the grasp of the power of the culture, the Principlalities and the Powers. What hope does anyone have? Hope is found in the Prophetic of the faithful – the power to change minds. Walter Bruggemann, in his classic book, The Prophetic Imagination: “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.”

To Effect a change in perception. Imagination is a legitimate way of knowing. Biblical imagination is our starting point. We follow its trajectory from there. Two primary tasks.

First, to delegitimize the idolatrous ways that society is ordered, to bring a critique and reject the idols of the dominant powers.

Second task: To nurture an alternative consciousness that energizes persons and communities to live toward the promise of a new time, a new day that God is bringing.

Bruggemann: “Our hope is never generated among us, but always given to us. And we are amazed.” Moses' vision in our scripture passage today: “If only all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!” This is the task, not of the lonely prophetic voice, but the prophethood of all believers. It is up to us to discern and discover what God is up to, and then lift up our voices over the fence with our neighbors, on the elevator with strangers, in the board rooms, in the public square.

An energizing alternative vision of who we are, and where we might yet go. The Bible says: “With God, all things are possible.” *What are the prophetic possibilities God is giving the world? *What are the prophetic possibilities God is giving to the House of Hope? The Prophethood of All Believers is the call of the Christian Church today. It will take all to bring to consciousness the possibilities God is giving to the world today.

James Luther Adams, in his time, became a highly regarded Theologian. Early in his career, in 1935, he went to study in Germany. Germany was known for its profound thinkers in theology and Bible. He had high expectations.

But when he arrived, he was confronted a deeply unsettling fact: Germany's churches were not effectively resisting the rise of the Nazis. Their way of thinking about Christianity did not have adequate resources for seeing the dynamics of evil that were going on around them. And their faith did not offer adequate resources to resist.

But there was a prophetic wing of the church — known as the “confessing church” -- whose members actively opposed Hitler at great personal risk. Adams later described the impact of his experience: “...in Nazi Germany I soon came to the question, “What is it in my preaching and my political action

that would stop this?" . . . "[It is not enough] to say that we keep ourselves informed and read the best papers on these matters, and perhaps join a voluntary association now and then. "But to be involved with other people so that it costs, and so that one exposes the evils of society . . . requires something like conversion, something more than an attitude.

"It requires a sense that there's something wrong and I must be different from the way I have been." Adams's experience in Europe left a lasting mark on his thinking. He went on to teach at the University of Chicago, and Harvard. He talked about conversion, guilt, sacrifice, discipline, tragedy, which was practically unheard of in his denomination because he was a Unitarian.

But he saw that without strong ideas and constructs, religion becomes complacent, merely accommodating cultural trends. Distorts the values that are core to faith and democratic government.

Adams became the leading exponent of the church as "the prophethood of all believers" — seeing the church as an institution whose people, rooted in the biblical and liberal traditions, learn to judge and correct their society. Adam's insights are that a faith that is lax, uncritical, or vaguely broad-minded attitudes, especially in an age of rising tyrannies of the Right and the Left," capitulates to our worst nature.

"The aim of religious awareness, religious faith, religious community, and religious life must be . . . change." Transformation.

First a change of consciousness, a change of mind. Then a change in how we act in society. Now, it is up to people of faith to claim their call: what was formerly the vocation of the few: the Hosea's, Jeremiah's, Micah's, is now given to all of us. The Prophethood of All Believers.

Because the world needs a new way of seeing. A new imagination of what is possible. And the motivation for people to move into that new world.

And the truth of the Prophets is this: Things do not simply work themselves out; human beings must push.