

“The Prophet and the Mystic”  
January 28, 2007

Jeremiah 1:4-8  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Early in my last year at divinity school, another student I had gotten to know during our first year there returned from a year-long internship with a congregation in the Pacific Northwest. “Jim” was an interesting man. He had served in the Marine Corps during the first war against Iraq; while he was in Iraq, he had experienced a profound conversion to non-violence; and, in the years before he enrolled in divinity school, he had been an organic farmer in western Massachusetts. When I heard Jim was back after his year-long absence, I looked forward to seeing him and asking him what it had been like to serve a congregation full-time.

Not long after the school year had started, there was gathering for the ministry students at the divinity school. We talked about pastoral care and pastoral authority (or *lack* of pastoral authority). A couple of students talked at length about their struggle to decide whether or not to wear a pulpit robe – you can see where I stand on that issue! – and then we moved on, to the topic of preaching. I’m sure other people had things to say about the subject, but the only thing I remember from that part of the conversation was something Jim said. And I’ve probably forgotten what everyone else said because what *he* said struck me so deeply.

Jim told us that, shortly after he had arrived at his internship church, the senior minister had become very ill. At the same time, the associate minister was on sabbatical, so almost all ministerial responsibilities fell on Jim’s shoulders. Unexpectedly and almost immediately, Jim found himself preaching every week. He described the experience to us, and he said that, during the first couple of months, his sermons were prophetic, focused on social justice issues, and that it was only later that he offered some sermons from his heart.

The group discussion moved on from there, but Jim’s distinction between prophetic preaching and preaching from the heart bothered me. It still bothers me. How can it make any sense to separate the prophetic call from the heart? How can it make any sense to separate the call to do justice from the call to love? Do we really think the prophets of the past and the present are grounded in something other than the heart and love? More important, is anyone really willing to *listen* to a prophet who calls out, not in love, but in a scolding harangue?

This bit of conversation from divinity school has been on my mind the last week because of this morning’s readings. We started with Jeremiah’s call to be a prophet. As the reading tells the story, the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah, saying, “To all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.” And, so, Jeremiah hears the call and begins living into his calling as a prophet, prophesying that great destruction and suffering will come upon Jerusalem and its people. Jeremiah’s message can be harsh, but I agree with many scholars and preachers that Jeremiah’s passion for God and for speaking what he believed was the truth was rooted in passionate *love*. At the same time, that love frequently does not come through very clearly and sometimes, it doesn’t seem

to come through at all! Jeremiah the challenging prophet is easy to see; Jeremiah the loving prophet is harder to discover.

So we started this morning with Jeremiah's call to be a prophet and then moved on to the apostle Paul, writing to the church in the city of Corinth. I know there are a number of you, here in this sanctuary, who would say that Paul, like Jeremiah, can seem lacking in love and compassion, and I think you know that *I* am one of those people. Many of us come to this morning's reading from Paul with what I'll call a complicated, multi-layered relationship with Paul and his letters.

But in this morning's reading, we encounter Paul in one of his most poetic, most loving, most mystical moments. Paul is writing as if he has been swept into communion with God and has experienced the all-encompassing, all-healing, transformative power of divine love. He's still the Paul many of us are uncomfortable with, and in this letter as well as subsequent letters, he will once again use those popular devices of ancient rhetoric, things like insult, ridicule, and anger, to make his point. But in this morning's passage, the cranky, frequently unpopular prophet and the loving, lyrical mystic are joined in one moment and in one human being.

Here, in the words of Paul and also in the opening words from Joan Chittester, we hear God's call into love, God's call into sacred, *demanding* love. Joan Chittester suggests that love demands we make community with one another, share ourselves with one another, and allow the people in our lives to be who they are and to grow as they can. Writing at a far away time and in a far away place, Paul speaks of the utter primacy of love, without which no spiritual gift, no faith, no prophetic power can have anything of value to offer. He describes love as the source of the qualities that allow human relationships to thrive: patience, kindness, the absence of envy, the absence of arrogance.

"Love never ends," he writes. "Faith, hope, and love abide; and the greatest of these three is love." He does not discount his own or other people's prophetic powers or knowledge or faith or generosity as unimportant. Instead, he directly and simply says that those gifts will have lasting value only if they *arise* from love and are *shaped* by love. Paul the mystic, who has experienced the power of God's love, is warning all prophets, including himself, always to draw their prophetic vision and their call to justice from that love.

So despite what my friend in divinity school thought about preaching prophetically *versus* preaching from the heart, the prophet of justice and the mystic of love are bound together, each of them necessary in our own lives and in our own communities. Here, in this community of faith, many prophets call us to justice. They call us to see and to change the ways we're ignoring God's call and claim in our lives.

Here at FCC, we *have* and we *are* prophets who seek to open all our eyes to the damage we've done and the damage we continue to do to the very earth that sustains us. These prophets call us to care for the earth and all its inhabitants as the beloved creations of God that they are.

We *have* and we *are* prophets who seek to open all our hearts to the pain, love, and struggle in the lives of our sisters and brothers who have come to the U.S. simply because they want a better life for themselves and their children. These prophets remind us that borders and barriers do not come from God, and they remind us that the value of a human life does not depend on where that life began.

We *have* and we *are* prophets who identify the true costs of war, in the numbers of dead and wounded, in the destruction of homes, schools, and the earth itself, and in the creation of greater hate and deeper divisions.

We have and we are prophets who name torture for what it is, no matter who the perpetrator and no matter where the location – in San Quentin, in secret detention centers, or in the alleys of Baghdad and Beijing.

We *have* and we *are* prophets who speak the word of God, telling us clearly that God's vision for creation is not one in which the world's economic elite – and that includes *us*, my friends – give ourselves, our cats, and our dogs countless things that we don't need, while millions of our sisters and brothers, young and old, here and around the world, do not have enough to eat, do not have basic medical care, and do not even have a chance to learn to read and write.

We need all the prophets in the world and here in this congregation. We need to hear and heed their words, and we need to recognize and embrace the prophetic voice that cries out from our own hearts. But we also need the mystic's experience of God to guide us in our prophesying and in doing the work of justice and healing to which the prophets call us.

This morning's mystical passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians warns all of us, prophet and non-prophet alike, that if the things we're saying and doing are not grounded in love, they will amount to noisy gongs, clanging cymbals, and not much else. In our passion for God's justice and God's vision of shalom, we can forget and close ourselves to the love in which God calls us to hold one another. Love is what makes the prophetic vision possible and powerful; love offers a path away from a shouting contest between groups of self-righteous, intolerant visionaries. It offers a path away from perpetual war and perpetual argument by teaching us to see the humanity and divinity of those whom we call "enemy" and those we call "stupid." Love teaches us to see and celebrate one another as God sees us and celebrates us.

I'm not saying that it's easy to keep prophetic calls to justice grounded in love. But I *am* saying that it's possible. One of the people who has shown me that it's truly possible is named Lois Robison. Here's a short version of her story.

Lois' son Larry began showing signs of serious mental problems at the age of 12. She and her husband tried to get as much help for Larry as they could, and by his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday he had been diagnosed as having paranoid schizophrenia.

Once Larry became an adult, Lois no longer had the legal power to ensure that he got the treatment he needed. She tried to get him into a residential treatment program run by the state, but the program refused, because, they said, Larry posed no risk of harm to himself or others. A few months later, Larry had a severe psychotic episode, and on one horrible, horrible night, he killed his lover, their next door neighbor, and three other people.

Despite years' worth of evidence, the judge and jury at Larry's trial did not accept his insanity defense. They convicted him and sentenced him to die.

Over the next 25 years, through all the appeals and all the requests for clemency, Lois sought to prevent Larry's execution. She told me that the staff at the Pardon Board office and the staff at the governor's office treated her with kindness and compassion, but neither the Board nor the Governor was willing to commute Larry's sentence to life in prison.

What struck me in our conversations was the lack of bitterness in Lois' voice, the lack of a desire for revenge, the lack of a desire to hurt the people who had refused to help her and her son. I asked her how that was possible, and she told me.

She told me that a month or so before he was executed, Larry – who was receiving the mental health treatment he needed while he was on death row – a told her, very calmly and yet very passionately, ‘Mom, you have to love *everybody*, not just me. You have to love the judge, the jury, the prosecutor, even Governor Bush. You have to *love* them, Mom.’

Lois told me she didn't think she had been able to do what Larry had asked her to do, to love the people who would not stop her son's execution. But her voice and her conversations with me told a different story.

She *had* been serving as a prophet of justice and love all those years, losing battle after battle and then, finally, losing her son. But not once during our conversations had she ever seemed to hate the people who could have had mercy on her son but who refused. Not once had she revealed any desire to see them suffer. Not once had she revealed any desire for revenge. No, in her prophetic work and witness against her son's execution and against the death penalty, she had remained rooted in love, love for her son and also love for all people.

Living as both prophet and mystic is not easy, but it *is* possible. We and the world will be healed through our willingness to speak and live the prophetic word in and through our experience of God's love for all of creation. It *is* possible; it *can* happen. For that and so much more, thanks be to God.

Amen

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