

Sermon: “Reluctant Prophets” Martha Hodges Sept.14, 2008

Reading from *The Prophetic Imperative* by Richard Gilbert

[When used about preaching or the role of the church in society] the term *prophetic* refers to the scriptural tradition of ethical monotheism articulated in the Hebrew prophets, Micah, Amos, Isaiah, and others, with their emphasis on social justice. According to this tradition, a prophet is a divinely inspired preacher. Prophecy in the Bible does not concern itself primarily with foretelling future events. It deals rather with forthtelling the intuitively felt will of God for a specific situation in the life of an individual or nation.

Prophets were those to whom God revealed divine secrets... These prophets pointed out the perils of wickedness, confidently proclaiming what the people ought to do to realize the Kingdom of God, an ideal social order.... The prophets [of the Hebrew scripture] predicted disaster when the nation Israel did not follow the divine commands...

The prophets were not so much predictors of the future as they were its architects. They dropped an ethical plumbline over Israel and found her wanting. They saw their mission as serving people by dealing with the structures of society that oppressed them...

Isaiah, in words that have formed the structure of Christian worship for centuries, takes up the challenge of ethical monotheism with the ringing declaration, “Here I am! Send me!”

The seraphim in the following reading from Isaiah are a kind of angel of the highest rank, whose job was to guard the throne of God while ceaselessly chanting His praise. Their name in Hebrew means “burning ones.”

Reading Isaiah 6:6-8

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting down upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

And one called to another and said: Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts and the whole world is full of his glory.” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was full of smoke.

And I said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal which he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth, and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven."

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

Sermon: "Engaging Our Second Source: Reluctant Prophets"

Imagine the terror of Isaiah as these fiery creatures call out in their mighty voices, shaking the very foundations of the temple. Isaiah finds himself before God on his throne and knows himself to be unworthy, inadequate, "unclean" in the ancient Hebrew sense, that is, impure and unprepared to be in the presence of the Holy, as is the people whom he represents. He cries out in despair, pleading, "I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips!" He knows he is unworthy to speak for God. Then one of these terrifying creatures, his face hidden by his enormous wings, descends upon him, bearing a burning coal and touches the coal to the lips of Isaiah, saying "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven."

Now, it's important to know that "sin" in the ancient Hebrew world meant something like "failure to meet the mark." Failure to meet God's expectations and commands, failure to keep the terms of the covenant between the people of Israel and their God. "Sin" did not refer to any inherent depravity, as it would later do in the Christian church.

The burning coal takes away Isaiah's guilt. His sin is forgiven. He is purified, made ready to speak God's will to his people. And, helpless before this command, he surrenders to the fate that God has assigned to him. He not only surrenders, he embraces this will. His fears, his hesitations and self-doubt, his knowledge of his own weakness, his personality and petty concerns all vanish in an ecstatic experience. When the voice of the Lord asks, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Isaiah accepts his call to be prophet to the people of Israel, knowing that, by doing so, he can save them. He embraces his fate, which is to speak to Israel and its leaders the words they do not wish to hear, to be scorned, avoided, reviled. His lips purified by fire, he finds his prophetic voice. Isaiah replies, "Here I am! Send me!"

Now, ministers are supposed to find and use that "prophetic voice." That's what they teach us in seminary. I'll tell you... When I decided to become a minister, I had no idea this was what I was signing up for. Like many people, I had always thought a "prophet" was someone who prophesied the future. I didn't get the part about that future being dependent on the people obeying some holy imperative which they ignore to their peril. And I certainly didn't get that that prophetic imperative was expected to come through me. Who was I to tell anyone else what they should be doing, how they should be living? And yet... Who was I **not** to share my vision of a beloved community – a

world in which “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?”

For that matter... Who are **you** – or any of us -- not to share this vision...? to find a prophetic voice... to reply to life, “Here I am! Send me!” Our tradition is pretty clear on this point. We are all pieces of divinity. We are all blessed with a voice. We are all touched by fire.

Over the past year I’ve been speaking to you about the six sources that our Unitarian Universalism draws from. I’ve spoken about the “direct experience of transcendent mystery and wonder;” about Jewish and Christian teachings; about Humanism and the guidance of reason. Today, I’m talking about the role of prophecy, in the ancient sense: “The words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Our second source.

Last winter, a group of us met one Saturday morning to talk about our seven principles and six sources. The UUA, the association of Unitarian Universalist congregations, had asked us to do this in order to share our opinions with the Commission charged with the regular review of these principles and sources that form our common identity. Did we feel that they expressed who we are, or who we strive to be? Did they describe how we want to be in the world? What we believe and the sources that inspire those beliefs?

The Commission, by the way, has now posted the draft of its revision on the UUA website and is requesting our responses to it. There is a place on the website for us to offer our opinions and we have until October 16 to do so. Interestingly, this “second source” seems to have disappeared from the suggested revision. I have mixed feelings about this.

When we met last winter to discuss this review, the language of this second source raised a lot of questions for many of us. Some of us wondered about those “powers and structures of evil.” Just to remind you, the second source currently reads like this: “The words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

“Words and deeds of prophetic women and men...” No problem there. We do indeed draw wisdom and inspiration from those voices, those prophets throughout history who have challenged us to create a better world. We proudly claim many of them as Unitarians or Universalists. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin; William Ellery Channing, Dorothea Dix, and Theodore Parker; Susan B. Anthony, Henry David Thoreau, Clarence Darrow, Whitney Young, Albert Schweitzer... the list goes on. And we embrace the teachings of other prophets: Martin Luther King, Mohandas Gandhi, Jesus... All of these women and men who fought for justice and to reduce the suffering of the world.

But here is the troubling question: Who or what is the enemy in this fight for justice? What about those “powers and structures of evil?”

Unitarian Universalists have a problem with evil. Namely, we’re not sure we believe in it. For many of us, “evil” summons up images of a horned devil, pitchfork at the ready... or perhaps Satan at the head of a board room table, conspiring with his minions to create those structures of evil: racism, poverty, and tyranny.

Or, if evil is not personified in a satanic being, we may still have a problem with “evil” even as an abstract force abroad in the world, a force to which we can succumb, a force that is responsible for suffering and injustice. Because we know... the source of suffering and injustice, of racism, poverty and tyranny is not evil... It’s us... We human beings.

How much easier if we could blame Satan, or evil, for what we do. Because if the source of the evil things that we do lies not in a satanic being or even in a disembodied force, if the source of the evil things we do lies only within ourselves – then it becomes our responsibility to do something to make it right. To make ourselves right.

And if we are the source, we might have to talk about sin. And sin is not a subject that Unitarian Universalists readily discuss. We tend to dismiss the idea of sin as a backward concept that others – those fundamentalist others – use to oppress themselves and each other and the rest of us. Sin as a kind of superstition, akin to and associated with the devil himself. Sin, as in “original sin”—the idea that, thanks to Adam, who listened to Eve, and Eve, who listened to the serpent, to Satan, we are the inheritors of an innately sinful nature that can be redeemed only through divine intervention.

After all, it was we Unitarians and Universalists who cut sin down to size. It was we who preached the liberating alternative to our Calvinist predecessors’ faith that humans are inherently depraved. The Unitarians preached the perfectibility of human nature, salvation by character, while the Universalists preached salvation through the loving forgiveness of God and the petty nature of our sins in the light of God’s infinite love. If we have any doctrine at all – and I believe we do, although we don’t call it that – it is that there is no eternal damnation.

After all, our beloved first principle affirms the inherent dignity and worth of every person. So what becomes of sin? How do we reconcile our faith in the goodness of human nature with the facts? The facts, so evident all around us, of suffering caused by none other than we humans? The facts of brutality, greed, cruelty and genocide? The facts of prejudice and hatred, of poverty and indifference to others? The fact, if you’ll pardon the expression, of sin? We can’t explain it away by blaming it on evil.

We all do things we know are wrong. We make compromises that diminish us. We keep silent in the face of cruelty and selfishness and speak when we should remain silent. We are quick to judge. Our empathy is limited. We act and speak out of a need to feel important, or safe, or to associate ourselves with those we admire or who hold power.

We act out of fear and self-interest at the expense of others. We turn away from those who need us. We take too much and give too little. We retreat behind irony and cynicism when our tenderness is threatened with exposure.

We miss the mark. The mark of who we want to be in the deepest and most innocent longings of the soul. We are merely human.

Evil is not a being or a force. Evil is not a noun. Evil is an adjective. Evil is the word that describes some of our actions. And evil does not describe people. Because, yes, we do have inherent worth. We're born with the potential to do tremendous good and tremendous wrong. We are not evil... Humankind is not evil, but the things that people do often are. And, yes, some of the powers and structures that we create are evil. And yes, it is up to us and us alone to confront those, as our second source says, with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love. This is the work of the prophet – not only the famous, the eloquent and the influential – but the work of you and me.

So let us be brave and, inadequate and yes, sinful, as we are, let us name those powers and structures that are evil.

In the words of Richard Gilbert, the author of *The Prophetic Imperative* that I read from earlier, “That which is evil is that which annihilates, hampers, or hinders life; that which is good is the saving or serving of life, enabling it to attain its highest development.”

If life is something sacred, something holy, something essentially good, we sin when we diminish or demean our own life or the lives of others, including the lives of other species and the living earth itself.

The destruction of the planet is evil and a world economy that wounds the earth in ways that cannot heal, destroying species and injuring our ecosystem beyond repair so that we may produce more, become richer and acquire more things, is a structure that diminishes and demeans life and is evil.

A culture and economy that depends on convincing us to buy things we don't need and cannot afford in an attempt to feed an emptiness that is spiritual and relational demeans life and is a structure that is evil.

A government that engages in wars fought for economic gain; a culture that teaches people to deny the humanity of those who are inconvenient or in the way; a system that cynically manipulates our finer impulses in order to attain or maintain power; these are evil systems. A system that treats human beings as means to an end demeans and disrespects life and is evil.

Racial discrimination that allows us to discard people because of the color of their skin, relegating children to inadequate schools, violent streets and lives of hopelessness is an evil system. A system that then locks these same people up in prisons that seek not to

rehabilitate but to punish and to put people out of the way of the privileged, diminishes life and is an evil system.

A government, economy or educational system that deprives people of freedom and self-determination either through coercion or because of prejudice and poverty, is an unjust system, an evil system. A social or religious system that insists on conformity and punishes the exercise of free thought and free choice diminishes life and is a system of evil, as is a legal system that makes second-class citizens of any of us – gay or straight, rich or poor. Any system that teaches us that our differences are greater than our sameness, that seeks to divide rather than to unite, is evil.

A system that denies anyone the basic necessities of life – adequate food, clothing, housing and medical care – is a system that diminishes life and is evil. A system that uses people up and discards them when they are no longer useful diminishes life and is evil.

So what about our second source? Is it worth keeping? Does it mean anything to us? Whether or not it remains in the official bylaws of the UUA, it remains foundational to our UU beliefs. Ours is a religion that is grounded in *this* world, imperfect as it is. We have never embraced a creed that excused us from the practice of justice and we never will. A Unitarian Universalism that did not preach individual and collective responsibility for righting wrongs would not be Unitarian Universalism. A Unitarian Universalism that did not honor and draw inspiration from the words and examples of those who put their principles into action for justice would not be our Unitarian Universalism. This is who we are.

Which brings us back to that prophetic voice. That voice brought into its own by the touch of fire. Our fire comes not from the seraphim. It comes from our love of the sacred, from our love of life and our passionate desire to make the blessings of life available to all. Our fire, the fire that gives us all the gift of prophecy, is the fire we see reflected in the eyes of one another, whose resonance we feel in the spirits of one another, and of all the people of the world.

We may protest. We may whine or wail, “Woe is me, for I am a person of unclean lips.” We may plead our inadequacy, our imperfection, our sinfulness, if you will. But that fire... That fire is not extinguished by our protestations. That fire is the fire of faith in the value and sanctity of life – the life of the planet, the life of our families and communities, the life of strangers and of peoples on the other side of the world. Touched by that fire, we can do no other than to reply, “Here I am. Send me!”