

July 2, 2017 • Holy Communion • Fourth Sunday after Pentecost



“Prophets in Our Own Country”

Homily by the Rev. Larry Young

Matthew 13:54-58

He came to his hometown and began to teach the people in their synagogue, so that they were astounded and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?” And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house.” And he did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief.

Someone has said that a prophet is one who tells people things they don’t want to hear about subjects they don’t want to confront, often at a time they find ill-suited and inconvenient. That very much seemed to fit Jesus’ visit to his home synagogue. Here their home-town boy was back spouting his uppity wisdom, and “they took offense at him.” Now knowing Jesus as we do, we can be sure he was only teaching what he understood was God’s truth, as he did throughout his ministry. But the Nazareth congregation didn’t want to hear it. You can just imagine the dialog going on in their heads: “He’s one of us—so he should think like we think!” There’s no guarantee that faith-based prophetic messages will ever win a popularity contest. But note that didn’t stop Jesus from speaking out of his own beliefs—even when he was not going to be well received.

When we understand the role of a prophet as bearing witness to one’s personal faith convictions and values, we know that being prophetic at certain times just comes with the territory for Jesus’s people. To be a follower of Jesus means to care about the things he cared about and to act on them, in whatever words or deeds are right for us. And it means knowing we may not gain any popularity points for our efforts.

As we approach our nation’s birthday celebration this week, I see it as a fitting time to reflect on what it means to be prophets in our country at this point in time. We Americans have often referred to ourselves as “a nation under God.” So what role should we as Christian prophets be playing now?

The overriding political and social reality of our time, as we know, is the divisive partisan spirit that permeates our thinking as a people. Differences in political ideology have become exacerbated to the point where we are experiencing an unprecedented level of animosity and fearfulness. To be sure, a lot is at stake in terms of the decisions to be made. But we also have to ask what we as a people are becoming given this corrosive climate. Are we devolving to an “us vs. them” society in which winning points for our side is all that matters? Is it not possible that in the face of real differences we could come to a point of genuine respect for those who differ from us, out of a common concern for the greater good for all?

I think I know what might help us here: instead of focusing on our political position, first we could focus on what our Christian position on the issues is. And that means becoming clear about what Jesus’ message means to each of us. What priority am I called to give to the needs of others versus my own? How am I called to welcome the stranger? What’s my responsibility for environmental health? What share of material goods should I claim? What kind of ethical behavior am I called to? You see, when I begin with my Christian position on current issues, then the focus is on what I most deeply believe and value rather than what political camp I identify with. Yes, my Christian convictions may well correlate with some political position. But this way the emphasis is on what should matter most to me—my faith. Hopefully my relationship with God and how that informs my life matters more than what political party I relate to.

Putting the focus first on our faith values may do two things for our national well-being. First, it can help all of us keep clear for ourselves that how we deal with the needs of people in our nation is our real agenda—not our partisan differences. What makes for the greatest good for the greatest number is what really matters—not our own pet ideologies or personal agendas. So hopefully this will help keep each of us personally on a constructive trajectory. And secondly, if we hold to this focus for ourselves, if we persist in holding a faith-based perspective on the issues that face us, we may encourage others to move to this level of debate that goes beyond partisan warfare. Now of course there are sure to be others who will not have the same faith perspective as we do. But hopefully we can engage one another with more mutual respect when we speak out of the faith that grounds us.

Now to be sure the variety of issues our nation faces will call us to reflect on our faith values in a multitude of ways. No one faith statement is likely to be relevant to all the issues before us. But there is one focus that I see as particularly important for us in our prophetic role. In Luke’s account of Jesus’ visit to his hometown synagogue, we learn the words that made them so upset with him. Quoting from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus says, “...he has

anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." These are marching orders for a prophet; and again and again in his ministry, Jesus underscored that what we do for the last, the lost, and the least in our society is what God especially cares about.

I believe this is a faith guideline that our nation especially needs. It is so easy for all of us to get wrapped up in a focus on what will be good for me personally, what will serve my particular interests. But the nation's agenda, especially for a nation we call Christian, is to serve the well-being of all its citizens, all those whom God loves. And if the needs of those at the bottom of our society are addressed, it's very likely that the rest of us will also be well-taken-care-of because of the greater influence we have in our national decision-making. As Christian prophets I believe we are called to lift up this larger view of human well-being as a plumbline for our nation.

The separation of church and state is a well-established principle for us as Americans. But in no way does that equate with separating faith from politics. So far as we know, Jesus did not publicly identify with any political group, but his teachings and actions clearly had political implications—so much so that they led to his crucifixion by the political powers of his day. So when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are remembering a Jesus who lived a faith that spoke to the social order around him. And so his table is a place where we can find strength for living out our faith values in our society. Our calling is to be prophets in our own nation; and may God give us the wisdom and the will so to do. Amen.