

Homily – Prophets and Priests

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March 17, 2024 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

A few weeks ago, I heard a talk by the ex-mayor of San Luis Obispo in which she shared her own experience with two part of her life. In the first part, this ex-mayor was an activist and worked on many causes to make our world a better place. In the second part of her life she has been an official, working as a leader in educational institutions and then for many years as an elected official. Activist and official seem like they would conflict with one another and this ex-mayor talked about that, how they rubbed against each other but also how they informed one another.

When I heard that, I leaned over to the religious studies professor who was sitting next to me, and whisper that in the church this was like the roles of prophet and priest. These two roles can rub up against each other but they also inform one another. Remember, prophets don't foretell the future. Instead they jump up and down to get our attention, and they proceed to tell us, in often vivid language, how we have gone astray from the ways of God and healthy spirituality. Put another way, prophets lead us into sacred space by showing us the insufficiency of the old order. Today's Old Testament reading from the prophet Jeremiah laments that the old ways have failed and new ways and a new covenant are needed.

Conversely, the priest's role is to teach us how to live in the new realm. Through teaching, preaching, counseling, and the Sacraments, a priest will share spiritual practices and exercises that help us be part of the kingdom of God. We live in the kingdom both as individuals and as a community. Today's New Testament reading from the letter to the Hebrews is from the perspective of the priest according to the order of Melchizedek, and we are given examples of how to live in the kingdom by following the example of the Godly life Jesus lived in the days of his flesh.

Now unfortunately, priests too often operate separately from prophets. Priests talk of a new realm but never lead us out of the old order where we are still largely trapped. And out of necessity or simple division of labor, prophets can lead us into death of the old ways but sometimes leave us stuck without the tools to live a new resurrected life. You may have noticed through your own lived experience that following the prophet and letting go of the old, somewhat comfortable ways of living, can involve some pain. Whenever we're led out of normalcy into sacred, open space, it's going to feel like suffering, because it's letting go of what we're used to. This is almost always painful, for part of us has to die if we are ever to grow larger. Or using the words of today's Gospel reading, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for

eternal life.” If we’re not willing to let go and die to our small self, we won’t enter into the new sacred space that is our birthright.

Now, in this new realm to which the prophets lead us, and the priests nurture us, everything belongs. This awareness is sometimes called a second naivete. It is a return to simple consciousness. The first awareness is a dangerous naivete, which doesn’t know but thinks it does. In second naivete, darkness and light coexist, paradox is revealed, and we are finally at home in the only world that has ever existed. This is true knowing. Here, death is a part of life and failure is a part of victory. Opposites collide and unite, and everything belongs.

And, in this mature spirituality, the secular becomes sacred. There are no longer two worlds. We no longer have to leave the secular world to find sacred space because they’ve come together. That was the significance of the temple veil rending when Jesus died. The temple divided reality into the holy world inside and the unholy world outside. That’s why Jesus said the temple had to fall: “Not a stone shall stand on a stone.”

Our word “profane” comes from the Latin words *pro* and *fanum*, meaning “outside the temple.” The great spiritual writer, Teilhard de Chardin, said, “Nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.” In this second naivete, in this more mature way of seeing, there is only one world, and it’s the supernatural one. There is no “natural” world where God is not. It is all supernatural. Christ is in all and around all. All the bushes burn now if we’ve seen one burn. Only one tree has to fill up with light and angels, and then we never again see trees the same way. That’s the true seeing we call contemplation. We need to refresh our seeing through contemplation because we forget the beauty and sacredness of all the world and of all people. We start clinging and protecting. Unless there is a readiness to let go, we will not see the vision of the whole. God cannot be seen through the old small lens. We must let go of that old way and embrace the new better lens. A single grain must die so it can bear much fruit.

I can see why Christians use the language of “born again.” Many of us feel that this term has been coopted to be a quick litmus test on who is in or out of the club. Be that as it may, the great spiritual traditions seem to recognize the first birth is not enough. We not only have to be born, but also remade. The remaking of the soul and the refreshing of the eye is the return to simplicity. And this is the spiritual journey of our lifetime.

As we sang just a moment ago, O Holy one, kindle thou here in my heart, a flame of pure love to my neighbor, to my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all, to the brave, to the knave, to the thrall.

Remember, dwelling in sacred space ultimately involves seeing God and the world through a new, unified vision. But we don't get there without some sort of suffering. My prayer today is that each of you has a prophet you can follow out of your old life and that each of you has a priest that can help you live into your new life. The Holy Spirit has gifted all of us so maybe you too are a prophet or priest. Or maybe you are both. In this season of Lent, this season of preparation, may you see that all the world is sacred and infused with God.