

Prophetic Speech

Saint Paul's Cathedral, San Diego

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Scott Richardson +

Gracious God,

Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.

Amen.

By the spring of 1967, Martin Luther King was worn down by his long struggle for civil rights in America. He decided to take a break – four weeks of reading and writing in Jamaica. He got to the airport, bought a stack of magazines, and went directly to the airport restaurant to get a bite to eat. He opened up one of the magazines, *Ramparts*, to a photo essay of grievously wounded Vietnamese children, victims of the war. He pushed his plate away. What's the matter, his friend asked – doesn't the food taste good? Nothing will ever taste good again, he said, until I've done everything I can to stop this war.

This was a touchy subject in King's movement. Many of his supporters and advisors wanted him to stay focused on racism and poverty, his two main themes. But King felt an ever-increasing need to open up his lens and see a broader landscape. When he got back from Jamaica, he gave a talk in Los Angeles and then, on April 4, 1967, exactly one year away from his impending murder, preached an historic sermon at Riverside Church in New York, giving seven reasons why the U.S. should withdraw from Vietnam. He said, "We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world – a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight."

Those who supported the war effort were, of course, furious. They strongly suggested that King return immediately to his previous topics. And again, even some of his loyal advocates disagreed with him for strategic reasons. But King was buoyant, renewed, uplifted. A burden had been taken from him. The word that had been put on his heart had been spoken in the world and he was bolstered by the blessing of that.

I bring up Dr. King's sermon this morning because today's readings have to do with prophetic utterance. Jeremiah is called to speak the word of the Lord and he resists, arguing that he is too young. Not to worry, says the Lord, I'm with you; I put my words in your mouth, I set you over nations and kingdoms. This is my work and you are my chosen servant.

Paul, in the central part of his letter to the church in Corinth, first mentions prophecy before listing other gifts of the Spirit. Those other gifts, by the way, are wisdom, generosity, and courage – all, we would say, central to life in Christ. But none of them amount to a hill of beans without love, Paul says. The word of God may be burning in your heart but it won't do anyone any good if it isn't deepened, matured, and tempered by love. Prophecy will finally come to an end, only love endures.

Then Jesus, in the gospel, claims the fulfillment of prophecy after reading from the text of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth. His fellow townsmen are first delighted by his offering and, just a bit later, disturbed by his pretension. They question his pedigree. He questions their sense of spiritual exclusivity, suggesting that God is doing something larger in the world than they perceive. This doesn't go down well; they try to kill him but, somehow, he eludes their grasp and moves on to the next town.

So there we are: Jeremiah resists the call to prophecy, Paul attaches it to love, and Jesus fulfills it. Those three moves give shape to our continuing reflection on the topic. How do we resist the call to prophecy? How should the prophetic word be offered even now? How is Jesus central to the prophetic word spoken today?

I spoke to a friend the other day who is a lobbyist for sober living homes. That seems oxymoronic, doesn't it? A lobbyist for sober living homes. Why wouldn't we all be in favor of supporting people who are desperately trying to get well? The answer to that question – NIMBY. Not in my backyard. People may be in favor of sobriety but they have concerns about a collection of recovering drunks living next door or just down the street. So my friend goes to meeting after meeting, city after city, up and down the state, pleading the case of those who are ready to put the plug in the jug and who just need a place to do that, a community of support.

At every meeting, she hears the same concerns expressed – Who are these people? Can we trust them? Should we expect trouble? Who will be coming to visit? What about traffic? Property values? My friend tries to listen carefully and respond to legitimate concerns. She restrains herself, holds back, she doesn't want to contend perpetually, but finally reaches a point when she has to speak up – that's her job but it's also her passion and her call and her vocation. She will wither if she lets fear get expressed endlessly but not hope. She knows that the needs of all concerned can be addressed if people are willing to engage one another in a spirit of trust and shared vision.

In this sense, my friend is a contemporary prophet. I tell her story only to inspire those of you who may sit through similar meetings (the topic may differ) and wonder if you should finally get up and say something. The answer is probably

yes - get up; as my friend Ed Bacon says, if your heart is beating frantically then that's a reliable sign that it's your turn to speak.

And then be focused when you do so. Be concise. Care for those who do you the honor of listening. How often have you been at a meeting and listened to people blather on about nothing? Saint Paul reminds us elsewhere that five words well chosen exceed ten thousand offered sincerely but incoherently. The prophetic word is loving and it's sharp – it doesn't intend to cut but it is honed. It's thought through. It makes sense. It challenges but doesn't obfuscate, confuse, or lead others down blind alleys. It pulls away the veil of ignorance, sloth, sin, toxic self-interest, and makes that which should be obvious perfectly clear. In this sense, prophetic words are the running lights on the path of righteousness, justice, compassion, mercy, and love.

And, for Christians, this prophetic word always links back to Jesus. We don't have to make it up – he said it before we said it. When you stand to speak, be sure that your word and your manner honor his spirit, his example, and his teaching. Be about resurrection, not resentment; hope, not hatred; peace, not perverse power; joy, not judgment; healing, not hell-fire; building up, not breaking down.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist teacher, reminds us that it is often easier to write protest letters than love letters. That is not our way. The Bible tells us to speak truth to power and to speak the truth in love. Speak truth to power and speak the truth in love. We will neither stay silent nor blast others with our perception of the truth. We offer the word that has been given to us with respect and, as importantly, we listen to the truth of the other person. We listen to the truth of the other. In the end, listening with love (not speaking, but listening with love) may prove to be the most prophetic thing that we can do. Amen.