

“Perplexing and Prophetic”

Luke 12:49-56

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most perplexing statements Jesus made. It appears to be in conflict with other things said by him or about him.

“For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, **Prince of Peace.**” (Isaiah 9:6)

“Blessed are the **peacemakers**, for they will be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

“**Peace** I leave with you; **my peace** I give you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27)

Compare these statements to the one Jesus shared with his disciples as they were making their way to Jerusalem to observe Passover, a trip that would result in Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion.

“Do you think I came to bring **peace on earth**? No, I tell you, but division.” (Luke 12:51)

How do you reconcile these passages, which seem to be sending conflicting messages?

I think you begin by analyzing those disturbing words Luke recorded. When you discover the context, the gap between these verses narrows, at least it does for me.

What is the tone of our entire text for today? What do you think Jesus was feeling? I sense a high degree of frustration, disappointment, anxiety, anger and urgency.

We are not accustomed to thinking of Jesus this way, are we? It tends to make us feel uncomfortable.

Why was Jesus dealing with such strong emotions and under so much stress? Many of the religious leaders who claimed to speak for God and shaped the Israelites values and priorities rejected Jesus. They did everything in their power to sabotage his ministry.

Their hatred for him and resistance to him mounted every day. Jesus knew deep down in his heart they would stop at nothing to silence his voice and this included crucifying him as a traitor.

Knowing this, was Jesus intimidated by them, and did he alter his message? No. He assumed the role of a prophet, speaking out even more boldly on behalf of those whose voices had been muted.

He exposed the hypocrisy of the religious authorities who were more concerned about their welfare than the people they were called by God to serve. He shed light on their addictions to power, prestige, attention, money and luxurious lifestyles. He called them out for being pious but unloving, quoting the Torah with callous hearts and demanding respect from everyone without giving respect to those they encountered.

Jesus continued to share his vision of the kind of world God envisioned, one where people value serving over being served, healing over hurting, sacrifice over self-indulgence, generosity over greed, love over hate, truth over deception, justice over injustice, inclusion over exclusion, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge and peace over violence.

His voice grew stronger as his fears increased. "How I am distressed," Jesus said to the disciples in our text, but he refused to retreat, calling upon the religious leaders who were good at forecasting the weather to see how God was using him to lead in new directions.

What kind of impact did Jesus have upon people? To begin, he incensed the authorities, which should not surprise any of us. Any time you threaten the powerful and mess with their pocketbooks, they don't like it.

What may surprise you is that Jesus' message divided households. Family members quarreled as they voiced their opinions of Jesus and critiqued his message. Some welcomed and supported Jesus while others saw him as a disloyal trouble maker.

What are we to take away from this text? I pondered this for some time last week and believe it to be this.

Following Jesus will not be easy. At times, we will be called upon to assume the role of a prophet, and at others times, we'll be encouraged to listen to the prophets God sends our way so we can make changes in our lives.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a prophet? Chances are you have not, but there is actually a high probability you have worn this hat even though you were unaware of it.

In the biblical tradition, a prophet is someone who seeks to know the heart of God and to do the will of God. For us, this has been made clearer by the life and ministry of Jesus.

God sent Jesus to this world to reveal God's nature. If you want to know who God is, look at Jesus. If you want to know what God thinks, listen to Jesus. If you want to know what God values, discover what Jesus valued. If you want to know how to handle a problem, a challenge or a temptation, look at what Jesus did.

As Christians, we believe if we faithfully follow Jesus, we will reflect the heart and nature of God. We will give our family members and friends a healthy image of God, one that reveals God's grand and noble dreams for a just and peaceful world.

By no means will it be easy to follow Jesus. The values Jesus articulated and the perspectives he called people to embrace cut across the social, economic and theological conventions of his day and will ours. It will put us in direct conflict with those who do not embrace Jesus' ethic of love.

Selfishness, greed, arrogance, dishonesty, deception, irresponsibility, indifference, hatred, revenge, bigotry, prejudice and disrespect had no place in Jesus' life and should have no place in ours. However, getting rid of these ungodly traits will be difficult in a world that not

only embraces them but rewards them. We'll be tempted to take the path of least resistance, to conform to the popular opinions of the majority and to avoid making sacrifices, like many who do not embrace Jesus' ethic of love.

This is why it is difficult to be a prophet. A prophet never takes the easy road. Reflecting the heart of God and doing God's will by following Jesus are a modern day prophet's highest goals, even when this puts him or her at odds with family members, neighbors or coworkers.

A prophet has another responsibility, though. Prophets hold people accountable for their decisions. When they see evil and injustice, they look for the people who are responsible and call them out. They work tirelessly to correct what is wrong and to lead people in new directions.

As my friend Tom Ehrich reminds me, there is a certain restlessness in being a child of God. Everything in this world or our families is not ok and as it should be, and a prophet cannot ignore it. This is why prophets tell the truth about what people are doing to each other, to creation and to God.

This is the reason Jesus told the truth about the motives and behavior of the religious authorities. In his opinion, they did not reflect the heart, mind and nature of God, at least not the God he knew so well. They were exploiting the most vulnerable among them, ignoring the needs of those who were struggling to survive and leaving people feeling hopeless. This was unacceptable to Jesus, and he believed they needed to repent.

There is something else you need to understand about being a prophet before you assume this role. Being prophetic is not the same as whining or complaining. True prophets don't baptize their opinions and shout louder than those who disagree with them.

Prophets suspend their understanding of truth in order to seek wisdom from God. They wrestle and grapple with complex issues and dig into biblical texts like an archeologist to understand the mysteries of life and faith.

They listen to people's stories and walk in their shoes, as Jesus did. They speak with humble and broken hearts and tremble at the thought of speaking for God. Their every word is shaped by God's dreams for the world, not theirs.

For you see, prophecy is rooted in the Golden Rule. From the beginning of time, God has raised up prophets to call out people who abuse, neglect or exploit others.

Prophecy is rooted in community. God raises up prophets to call out people who build walls of suspicion and hate instead of bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope.

Prophecy is rooted in justice. God raises up prophets to call out people who tilt the scales in their favor and do not play by the same rules they impose on others.

Prophecy is rooted in mercy. God raises up prophets to call out those who are critical, judgmental and unmerciful in spite of the fact they have been recipients of God's grace and given second chances.

Prophecy is rooted in listening. God raises up prophets to call out people who live in ivory towers where they cannot hear their neighbors' stories and respond to their pleas for help.

Prophecy is rooted in righteousness. God raises up prophets to call out people who live by a double standard that leads to favoritism and corruption instead of doing the right thing at the right time in the right place for all people.

Prophecy is rooted in God's dreams for the world. God raises up prophets to proclaim that God will never be satisfied until all injustice is corrected, all barriers are torn down, all cries for help reach caring ears, all tears are wiped dry, all wounds are bound, all weapons are turned into plowshares, all stomachs are filled, all the lost find their way back home, all the lonely are embraced, all sins are forgiven, all those headed down the wrong road turn around, all addicts overcome their addictions, all diseases are healed and all people are valued.

No, being a prophet is not easy, but where would our world be without them, the men and women who for centuries have articulated and modeled Jesus' ethic of love? Does your voice need to be added to theirs?

Is there someone in your family who is need of a prophet now? Is someone you love making bad decisions that are leading them down the wrong road? Do you need to have a candid conversation with them about the choices they are making and where they are leading?

If so, make it a matter of prayer and ask God to guide you. Especially ask God to help you go about this the right way.

Don't be a self-righteous, arrogant know-it-all. Like Jesus and the prophets who preceded him, speak and act with a humble and broken heart.

Clearly and plainly make your case. Share what you see on the horizon and offer an alternative vision. Above all, make hope visible and explain what you are willing to do to help them move in a new direction.

On the other hand, is someone trying to reach you? Has God sent them your way to open your eyes, heart and mind?

Is it time for you to listen and own up to your mistakes? Have you squandered opportunities to make something of yourself or trampled over people with your untamed ambition? Is someone trying to have a conversation with you about your behavior?

I hope you will listen and take their advice seriously. I also pray you will listen to the Holy Spirit, and allow God to help you take those first steps toward a new and better life.