

“Would That All the Lord’s People Were Prophets” Pentecost Preaching as Prophetic Preaching: Texts for Prophets

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A little tattletale comes running to father Moses, “Daddy, Daddy, Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp” (Num. 11:26). Earlier, the Lord, after speaking to Moses, took a notion to spread a little spirit on some of the elders, spirit which the Lord had previously disbursed mainly to Moses. Now, having received the gift of the spirit, Eldad and Medad get downright loquacious, begin speaking up for God. Joshua, one of the “chosen men” (11:28) doesn’t like this effusive spirit. “My lord Moses, stop them!”

We can’t have uncredentialed, uncertified people prophesying, speaking for God. Today Medad and Eldad (can these names be real or are they only here for comic relief?), tomorrow my son or daughter. Joshua asks Moses for a prophetic restraining order.

Moses’ response: “Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!”

Moses, who had not been too adept at speaking the truth to power himself until God gave him a spirited shove (see Exod. 3-4) is not niggardly of spirit. Would to God that all of God’s people were prophets! There are never too many spirit-gifted prophets.

The Lectionary on Pentecost wisely uses this obscure episode from Numbers 11 as a setup for an even more effusive, even more prophetic spiritual breakout in Acts 2. At Pentecost, we all had gathered in one place. Then there was a rush of wind, tongues of fire, Holy Spirit. As in Numbers 11, the Spirit’s gift is the gift of speech, prophecy. As in Numbers 11, the Spirit’s creation of a multitude of preachers results in communal bewilderment (Acts 2:6). Amazed and astonished, we ask “What does this mean?” Peter refers us to the prophet Joel. In earlier days, the Spirit was poured out on a few gifted (or at the least, offensive) individuals called prophets. But there will be a day, according to Joel 2:28-32, when God’s Spirit shall be poured out on all. All. Even among the typically voiceless—old women and old men (pensioners, usually institutionalized, nonproductive therefore nonvalued); young people out of work, maids, janitors—God’s Spirit shall descend in the later days, bringing things to speech. Those who never appear on the pages of the *New York Times*, those never asked to say a few words at the microphone, shall speak. Of course, if you have been following the story since the gospel of Luke, the irony is that this promise is recalled and so boldly told by Peter, who, just a short time before, could find nothing to say when confronted by the maid in the courtyard (Luke 22:54-62).

Later the world would marvel that such “ignorant and unlearned” people (Acts 4:13) were speaking, each telling in their own words “God’s deeds of power” (Acts 2:11). The holy wind at Pentecost, is power unto speech. The gift of Acts 2 is the gift of prophecy. That day surely somebody remembered Moses’ swaggering, “Would that *all* of God’s people were prophets!” That day is now, those prophets are us.

If Easter is properly the beginning of Pentecost, the frame which holds the

church's Great Fifty Days of Joy, then Pentecost is a fitting, raucous beginning of a summer of congregational reflection upon what it means to be the church. Lections throughout the summer, unlike much of the church's year, invite sustained thought about the church since they are given to us in a consecutive way. Unlike the rest of the year where the "propers" are selected on the basis of some topic or theme, during ordinary time after Pentecost, the lessons move on three independent tracks with no immediate relationship between them, except for those Sundays, particularly in Year A, when the Old Testament serves as a foreshadowing of the events of the gospel. This typological reading is especially appropriate for Matthew's way with scripture.

I therefore propose that the preacher take a cue from the pairing of Numbers 11 ("Would that all of God's people were prophets") with Acts 2 ("I will pour out my Spirit upon all...your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,...Even upon your slaves, both men and women...."). The Spirit at Pentecost was poured out upon all, thus evoking a peculiar community of prophetic discourse, the church. While Matthew is not known to be big on this Spirit, Matthew knows all about the peculiar Spirit-empowered community of prophets. Let the preacher take, as an interpretive principle for this summer, Pentecostal reflection upon the church as a community of cut loose prophets of God.

I

Recently I heard distinguished homilectician, David Buttrick, lecturing on "The Future of Preaching." Buttrick lamented the demise of so-called prophetic preaching of the Sixties. This anguished lament: "Where-are-the-Bill Coffins-of-the-Nineties?" He indicated that the alleged demise of "prophetic preaching" was somehow related to the rise of Fundamentalism and "Duke theologians'" preoccupation with the scripture. Then Buttrick urged us preachers to have enough guts to embody the Tillichian "Protestant principle" of prophetic criticism of present social structures. His call sounded odd since, from what I hear, Buttrick's allegedly Protestant principle is embodied more in the preaching of contemporary fundamentalists who certainly seem to be doing more political preaching than liberal Presbyterians (although there are similarities between Fundamentalists and liberals since both tend to ignore the church as the basis for Christian thinking about the world.)¹

Of greater concern was Buttrick's use of "prophetic." Considering the results of a century of work on Israel's prophets, it is curious that this romantic, nineteenth century image of the prophets endures. The notion of prophets as irascible, lone, carping social critics, while congenial to our radically individualized culture, has little to do with prophecy in Israel or in church.

Recall the well known Niebuhrian statement,

"I am not surprised that most prophets are itinerants....I think the real clue to the tameness of a preacher is the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant things to people whom one has learned to love....Once personal contact is established you are very prone to temper your wind to the shorn sheep. It is certainly difficult to be human and honest at the same time. I'm not surprised that most budding prophets are tamed in time to become harmless parish priests."²

Niebuhr himself did not remain long in the parish, perhaps because he saw how impossible it was for a true "prophet" to be too limited by the average parish.

We now know, thanks to the work of scholars like Walter Bruggemann and Joseph Blankinsopp³ that Israel's prophets were, in the deepest sense of the word "traditionalists." They called Israel back to its originating event, urged a return to its unique Yahweh-given vocation, and had the formation of a countercommunity as their intention rather than mere criticism of present social arrangements. Lurking behind Buttrick's call for more "prophetic preaching" is a contentment with present social arrangements, a feeling that preachers are prophets when they offer a few constructive criticisms to the government for more just use of resources and power. Our calls for "justice" are rarely as critical or as "prophetic" as we claim them to be because our "justice" is usually based upon a thoroughly conventional understanding of what is possible within the parameters of present arrangements. Justice is something a bit to the left, and with more generous government support, than the proposals of Bill Clinton. Ironically, far from being an attack upon the present order, such preaching is legitimization of it.

Buttrick lamented that "no preachers spoke out on the Gulf War."⁴ Admittedly, few did speak out, yet not because they failed to be critics or because they were too narrowly biblical. Rather, our failure to speak up is related to our failure to see ourselves as a prophetic countercommunity. As my colleague Richard Hays has said, we preachers are formed by a church which is conformed to the world. When I became "prophetic" and criticized the Gulf War, one of my congregants told me that I should be grateful rather than critical because the forces of Desert Storm were part of the mechanism of democracy which enabled me freely to make such "prophetic" pronouncements from my pulpit. Freedom of religion was a gift of the US Army.

He was right. He knew that my critique was little more than a quibble over proper military deployment, not a fundamental challenge to a nation which is sustained by its military and to a church which wants to have it both ways. A fundamental critique would require an alternative world, a mode of thinking not constrained by conventional epistemology, induction into a new people who enable new thought and action.

It would be difficult to conceive of a more socially conformist message than the call for more preachers to be "prophets." A peculiarly sensitive individual, offering a few pertinent criticisms of the government, a few personal opinions about how to keep things running more smoothly, how to keep a lid on Los Angeles, is considerably less than prophecy in Acts 2. Prophets, in the mode of Acts 2, are being caught up into a new social order called church which is itself the fundamentally prophetic assault of God upon the present order.⁵ Would that all of God's people were prophets.

The church's prophetic critique of Desert Storm might be something like that of the Mennonites working in Iraq, or even the Anglicans celebrating eucharist in Baghdad. The church is, scandalously enough, God's answer to what ails the world.⁶ When the church is asked to say something political, we say church.

In *Resident Aliens*⁷ we told the story of Gladys, feisty church member who disrupted a meeting of the Christian Education committee with her simple prophetic question, "Why is the church in the day-care business?"

When I was speaking in Kentucky, a woman introduced herself to me saying, "I am Gladys."

"Gladys who?" I asked.

"Gladys in the book," she said. "I'm the one you described in the book. I have to be. Our Vestry was meeting and our priest was enthusiastically describing the upcoming youth retreat at Disney World. Something in me made me ask, 'Why are we taking a bunch of overprogrammed, affluent youth to Disney World and calling

that ministry?' The priest said something about 'building community.' I said that they could build community just as well by working in our Habitat for Humanity project. The priest got real defensive. Fortunately, the oldest member of the Vestry, an eighty-year-old woman, backed me up and said that she didn't see what a trip to Orlando had to do with ministry either. We had quite a meeting that night!"

As we said of Gladys in *Resident Aliens*, "the greatest challenge facing the church in any age is the creation of a living, breathing, witnessing colony of truth, and because of this, we must have pastors and leaders with training and gifts to help form a community that can produce a person like Gladys and people who can hear Gladys speak the truth without hating her for it."⁸

The Acts 2, Pentecostal test for prophecy is not a tally of how many preachers gave advice to George Bush during Desert Storm (George made quite clear to his own bishop that he had no use for preachers' advice) but rather how many people like Gladys we have produced, people who are able to say, No; people who can speak the truth to power, old men and women, janitors and maids with visions and dreams and who don't mind telling the world about them.

II

Matthew has been called the "most Jewish of the Gospels." Devoid of any concern for therapeutic ministry or individualized faith, it is utterly communal, corporate, political, fixated with problems of life in the community of the Messiah. It is also therefore the most "practical" of Gospels, concerned (beginning with the Sermon on the Mount) with questions of what to do when someone strikes you, what to do with marriage after divorce, how to act when you are given an order by a National Guardsman in Los Angeles.⁹

Trinity Sunday (June 6) has Matthew 28:16-20's universal, global claim of Jesus' authority over "heaven and on earth." The gospel is not personal or subjective but rather cosmic, global. Bill is not king nor is Hillary queen. Moreover, the church is not parochial or national. Our mandate is invasion of every nation, naming brothers and sisters by baptism, aiding every nation on earth by making disciples who refuse to be part of any nation. Tough assignment? Imperialistic claim? Yes. Assertions which would be nonsensical if not for the Pentecostal reassurance (or warning?) that "I am with you always...."

It's not only weird where prophets are sent—namely, into all the world, but also who comes to prophets wanting something. On June 13, Jesus calls an IRS man to be a prophet, then rushes off to help the child of an imploring father (Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26). On his way, a woman pushes through the crowd, touches Jesus, gets empowered, and is made whole. Then Jesus raises a little girl from the dead. By the end of the lection, we don't know which feat is more impressive. Pushy women, asking and receiving empowerment from Jesus, the dead being raised. Effusiveness characterizes the messianic age.

Such extravagant, barrier-breaking acts of compassion attract a crowd. There are always enough suffering people to enable a prophetic church to grow. Looking on the multitudes on June 13, Jesus sees that they are "like sheep without a shepherd," and prays to God to send even more "laborers unto his harvest." He calls the Twelve (another motley crew of Eldads and Medads) and gives them power to do for the crowds what he has done, all as sign that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 9:35-10:8).

In the exuberance of Spirit-empowered prophetic activity, June 20's gospel,

Matthew 10:24-39, is a sobering word. Acts of compassion cause trouble. The powers-that-be cannot have uncredentialed, unlicensed healing going on. It will surely not be long until the AMA and the insurance industry will rouse themselves. Prophets are not to be troubled by such criticism. Our worry is faithfully to acknowledge what is going on now that God's power has intruded (Matthew 10:32-33). Jesus warns, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth...." The Spirit disrupts family life. "Family values" are not a concern for prophets since, this is a new community founded, not on conventional social arrangements of family, clan, and nation, but rather on preaching, teaching, and baptism (Matthew 28:19-20).

Prophetic claims for folk like Gladys reach a crescendo by June 27 in our gospel, Matthew 10:40-42. "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward;..." (Matthew 10:41). Reception of one of the "prophets" commissioned by Jesus is reception of "the one who sent me." The link between Jesus and his disciples is amazingly close. Furthermore, reward for faithful reception of prophets is promised. What does it mean to be part of the community of whom Jesus says, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me..."? I think the church is frightened by such promise of power, such extravagant faith placed in us by Jesus. Here the preacher might explore concrete examples within the congregation of instances in which the world received Jesus by receiving Jesus' people.

III

Thus, using the interpretive insights provided by Numbers 11 and Acts 2 on Pentecost, the post-Pentecost preacher discovers concrete, practical, both encouraging and sobering guidance offered in this summer's gospel. With a beginning like this in June, what might the congregation look forward to in July and August? Ironically, with the rest of the world on vacation, shut down, out of business, the summer is a great opportunity for the church to listen to its peculiar word which is sometimes overwhelmed in the worldly cacophony. That word, Acts 2 suggests, keeps enunciating and enlarging upon the following Pentecostal themes:

1. The Spirit has given the world a *prophetic community*, not simply a few outspoken social critics.

2. The prophetic community is composed of young, old, maids and janitors, sons and daughters, those who have not had much opportunity, in the world's scheme of things, to speak. In other words, *The Holy Spirit produces uppity speech*.

3. The consequences of Spirit-filled speech tend to be political, economic, social, therefore *we shall discipline ourselves to read scripture congregationally, ecclesially, and therefore counterculturally* rather than therapeutically, subjectively, inductively, or relevantly, as the world defines relevance.

4. *The purpose of prophetic preaching is the production and equipment of a community of prophets*. Therefore, our summertime preaching has as its goal the evocation of prophetic schoolteachers, shopkeepers, nursing home residents, and sixteen year olds who can speak the truth to power. As Luther noted, we preach on Sunday in church so that they can preach the rest of the week.

It is sad that the Pentecost lection ends at Acts 2:21 rather than at Acts 2:47 because the miracle of Pentecost is the miracle of the evocation of a prophetic community, not just the credentialing of prophetic individuals. The claim that, "Awe came upon everyone,....All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need," is a claim about prophecy in the age of the Spirit. That lection

is read, appropriately on Easter 4 of Year A, as a claim about the political and economic effects of the Resurrection. Yet remembered now, on Pentecost and after, as fulfillment of Moses' desire in Numbers 11, it becomes a lens for all our reading of scripture, a way of locating the church, of setting the preacher in the right place to preach Pentecostally, prophetically.

NOTES

¹ The term "Protestant principle" is a mistaken caricature based upon old Protestant misconceptions of Roman Catholicism and upon some contemporary Protestants' mistaken assumption that community (church) is inconsequential as a basis for Christian thought. It is arrogant for protestant Christians to assume that they have a monopoly on critical thinking. Furthermore, all criticism proceeds from some point of view, some theological stance. Invoking criticism as a virtue begs the questions of, "From whence does our criticism arise?" and, "To what end is our criticism directed?"

Thus it is ironic that Jack Forstman concludes an otherwise helpful look at theologians under Hitler by criticizing Barth as "arbitrary and provincial" (256) and praising Bultmann as a practitioner of "radical criticism" (257-261), failing to note how culturally conditioned and accommodated was Bultmann's theology. It was not that Barth advocated, as Forstman contends, a "sacrifice of the intellect," it was rather that he and Bultmann disputed which intellect was worth using. *Christian Faith in Dark Times* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992).

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Meridian, 1960), p. 74.

³ Joseph Blankinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983).

⁴ I know of a pastor in a rural church outside of Anderson, South Carolina who did speak up against U.S. aggression because a woman in his church proudly sent me a tape of his sermon. Perhaps Dr. Buttrick is running with the wrong crowd.

⁵ See Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today* (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1988), 149-167 for a fine critique of the alleged conflicts between being "pastor" and "prophet" in today's church.

⁶ What is there about Presbyterians (Calvin's Geneva) which makes them so nervous about this kind of talk? Having once been on top socially and economically, they now seem to be nervous about any suggestion that formation of the church is more important than sustaining American democracy. Thus Douglas F. Ottati criticizes Hauerwas' "radical communitarianism," for confusing "loyalty to God and God's commonwealth with a constricted commitment to the church. It therefore fails to encourage and guide our participation in civic and economic institutions in order to fashion lasting, stable, relatively equitable and prosperous societies that might effectively address the scourges of our time." "The Spirit of Reforming Protestantism," *The Christian Century* (Dec. 16, 1992): 1165. Why does Ottati automatically assume that only the government has the means to right the "scourges of our time"? Such great faith in the "commonwealth" (i.e. government) always characterizes the thought of those in socially and economically dominate positions.

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 117-127.

⁸ *Resident Aliens*, 123.

⁹ Surely Raymond Brown is more accurate in calling Matthew the "most catholic" of the Gospels. *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 124-150.