

Where are our Prophets, Visionaries, Dreamers?

May 20, 2018

Pentecost is about expecting the unexpected. The writer Annie Dillard, in her beautiful little book entitled *Holy the Firm*, writes:

The higher Christian churches - where, if anywhere, I belong - come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches you expect it any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom.

It's important to remember, in other words, that the Christian church began with a bunch of preachers (men *and* women, if we read Peter accurately) who people thought were loaded. To be sure, what we have in this story is the author reading back into a moment in time the most important missionary innovation that Christians started – indigenous worship – praying and preaching in one's own language. It was Paul who recognized that you can't just preach about Moshiah – the Messiah, in Hebrew. You have to use the language of the people. And for Paul that was Greek – which gave us the word Christ. And for much of the history of the church, it was Latin – which gave us the word Lord. But the gospel is now preached in hundreds of languages – Portugese and French and Oneida. Pentecost is about the first Christians tailoring what they said and did to the needs of your neighbor. And when you tailor what you do to what your neighbor needs – then you'll have to expect the unexpected.

OUR FATHER # 1

The Gospel of John that we just read gets the history right – Christians began to preach in different languages because they got booted out of the Synagogue as heretics, and the Roman Empire wanted nothing to do with them, as the Emperor Nero demonstrated in 64CE when he made human torches out of some of these so-called Christians or Messiah-worshippers, and (according to tradition), when he crucified Peter upside down. The cause of all of this chaos was of course Jesus – whom Paul called a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles. So, who were these first Christians? *They* were the prophets, visionaries, dreamers. And where are OUR prophets, visionaries, and dreamers? Let me ask it again: where are our prophets, visionaries, and dreamers?

Being a prophet is a risky venture. A prophet wasn't a future-predictor. A prophet was a social critic. Say, for instance, that I say: as a prophet, I foresee the fall of America. Jeremiah Wright said something similar a few years ago. You may remember the exact phrase. Now, if I said that . . . there's the flag over there. The veterans would be up in arms (sorry for the bad metaphor). Sean Hannity would get ahold of the clip. Self-appointed "true Patriots" would take up a motion to get me fired (after barely a month in office!)

Jesus was a social critic. Muslims are clear about this – they identify him as a prophet. Like Peter in his sermon, Jesus imagined the sun darkened and a moon of blood and the fall of the Roman (and any other) empire. He thought that being a true Jew (or Roman) wasn't about superficial rituals. Saying, as Jesus did, that he saw the Temple going to fall was a way to say: "C'mon! Wake up! The ruler of this world is already condemned! We worship a living God. And the living God is gracious and merciful – much bigger than any tribe or nation or empire. So, c'mon, let's act like those loving people we claim to be!"

It was a rough week in world news for prophets. With the new U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, Texas preacher John Hagee was there to offer a prayer. The prayer repeated, over and over, one phrase: "Israel lives!" Not, mind you, God lives – but Israel lives. It's a subtle but blasphemous shift – from worshiping the living God to worshiping a nation-state. And while Hagee uttered his incantation, Palestinians who nonviolently protested the occupation of their homeland died on Gaza Strip. It was a rough week for prophets.

You will know them by their fruits, Jesus said. And when the fruits of a so-called prophet's prayer are death – you have all the evidence you need to decide about the truth of that message.

Jingoistic celebrations of nationalism are not prophecy. That's not the kind of community that the first Christians forged. So where are our prophets, visionaries, dreamers?

Listen to the words of Peter, the one who died for his faith, quoting from the Prophet Joel:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

So, where are our prophets, and visionaries, and dreamers?

OUR FATHER #2

Emma González is senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland, Florida. And on February 17 – just days after the mass shooting that left 17 of her peers dead, she spoke these words at a rally in Fort Lauderdale, Florida:

The people in the government who were voted into power are lying to us. And us kids seem to be the only ones who notice and our parents to call BS. Companies are trying to make caricatures of the teenagers these days, saying that we are all self-involved and trend-obsessed and they hush us into submission when our message doesn't reach the ears of the nation, we are prepared to call BS. Politicians who sit in their gilded House and Senate seats funded by the NRA telling us nothing could have been done to

prevent this, we call BS. They say tougher guns laws do not decrease gun violence. We call BS. They say a good guy with a gun stops a bad guy with a gun. We call BS. They say guns are just tools like knives and are as dangerous as cars. We call BS. They say no laws could have prevented the hundreds of senseless tragedies that have occurred. We call BS. That us kids don't know what we're talking about, that we're too young to understand how the government works. We call BS.

We had our own youth calling out some BS two Sundays ago. But I hope you also heard the ultimate message of Kaia and Eli, and all the young people of PF and YCA. It wasn't just critique, but it was a vision. Eli put it this way, in his opening prayer:

We give thanks to you on this day, God of inclusion, and of welcome, and of love. We have gathered here together to make joyful noise in your presence so that we may be your hands and feet in this community. We ask that you may open our hearts and minds; that we may listen and learn from what you have to say through the scriptures, sermon, prayers, and songs.

This beautiful vision of our youth is like the vision of Emma Gonzales: for a world without violence, where a God of inclusion, and welcome, and love works through us to grow a more peaceful world. Where are our prophets, and visionaries, and dreamers?

They are right in our pews. If not us, who? If not now, when? Hear the words of Peter, again, the rock on whom the church was founded, who said that God promised to “pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.” Who does that leave out?

LORD’S PRAYER #3

The Rev. William Barber, who has revived Martin Luther King, Jr’s “Poor People’s Campaign,” gets it. Rev. Barber recognizes that prophets, visionaries, and dreamers imagined a community in which ALL have the capacity to flourish – and that means addressing the systemic structures of violence – like our prison system, and like our war economy, that fuel inequality and keep people poor.

These are “enmeshed evils,” according to Barber. Systemic racism is part of it – and certainly has made private prison corporations rich, but the majority of poor – by large numbers, are white. According to the U.S. Census, there are nearly 41 million people in the U.S. living in poverty. But that number is probably much higher – maybe 140 million, who are “either poor or low-income,” and who live check to check, struggling to decide whether to pay for food, or clothing, or utilities. As one put it: “It’s just constant juggling, figuring out what bill to pay and what not.” That’s NOT what God intends. How can you be a prophet, a visionary, or a dreamer when you’re struggling to put food on the table?

And how can you flourish, if you’re a dreamer – when you’re one of those immigrants who has already contributed so much to America, when the government can’t pass a bill that forges a path to citizenship for you, and when ICE raids make your heart beat faster every time you hear a knock on your door. That’s NOT what God intends.

Here at Union UCC, we have an Immigration Advocacy Team. They're working hard – we met on Tuesday, to foster educational programs to make people aware of immigrant and refugee needs, to mentor middle or high school students, and to partner with agencies like Casa Alba and COMSA who currently aid immigrants in our area.

For instance – I met with Mahamad and Said of COMSA this week – and I can say with confidence that they have much to teach us – if and when we can learn to hear them. Lord, give us ears to hear!

So here we are, prophets, visionaries, dreamers. What chance do we have in a world drunk on power?

We can start small – with our neighbors. You never know when there might be a chance to testify. Last week, we had Ron from a local marine supply company come to our house to give us a bid for a dock. After getting out of our waders, I invited Ron into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. And we talked. He was a devout Roman Catholic – and an avid kayaker. We hit it off – and talked for the better part of an hour. But as he was leaving, he said to me – as he stood at the door: “So, you’re a professor and pastor – do you have anything to recommend to a grandfather who can’t attend his granddaughter’s wedding because she’s lesbian?” I literally groaned in pain, and then said: “Ron, Jesus said nothing about this. Why are you making such a big deal out of it? There’s a book by Matthew Vines called *God and the Gay Christian* that shows how there’s no incompatibility between being gay and being Christian. Jesus was all about love – remember the wedding at Cana – he even made some more wine when they ran out!” But Ron went on: “I know, I know – right and right, I don’t know, it’s just like my line in the sand. Marriage is for procreation.” And I felt such sadness for him, and for his granddaughter, and for church teaching that had so constricted his vision of what love is. I doubt I changed his mind, but maybe, maybe I made him think a little – and I hope he finds it in him to attend his granddaughter’s wedding.

So, we can start small – with our next-door neighbor. Be a prophet, a visionary, a dreamer. But also think big. The church began as a tiny, persecuted sect – kicked out of the synagogues and hated by the Empire. But they spoke the languages of the people, and those prophets, visionaries, and dreamers – those men and women, slave and free, young and old – became the very agents of history. They took the name of the loving Christ, through the fire of the Holy Spirit, to all the world – there are now roughly 2.2 billion of us. And together, we bend the moral arc of the universe, slowly, slowly, slowly, toward justice. May that be our prayer – Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on us all. Amen.

Dr. Jon Pahl
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Pentecost Sunday
May 20, 2018