

Fruit on the Outside

May 9, 2021

Acts

A few years ago, while a group of colleagues and I were studying scripture, someone asked, “Do any of you know ANYONE who has done anything truly prophetic?” We thought for a while, bandied possible examples back and forth, but the consensus was that prophets, like Jeremiah and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Theresa and Father Groppi are few and far between.

And yet, that question has stayed with me. It has niggled at my brain (or more appropriately, at my soul), because, quite frankly, I think that a lot of you are prophetic.

In the passage that Cheryl read for us today from the Acts of the Apostles, we read that Peter is preaching and teaching to some Gentiles about Jesus, that the Holy Spirit pours itself out upon those Gentiles, and that the “circumcized believers,” Jesus’ original “in crowd,” wondered how this could be. We humans have a lot of expectations, a lot of preconceived notions of how things should be. Even though we know that God is so much bigger than we are, even though we know that God’s ways are so much more amazing and more creative than we could ever dream, we still imagine that we can box God up, define where and how the Holy Spirit will pour itself out.

And so, as I ponder my friend’s question about whether I know anyone who is truly prophetic, I think of folks who have lived boldly, who have allowed the Holy Spirit to work through them despite what societal conventions might say, who have broken down barriers of how people told them that Love should work, who have not allowed the limitations of small expectations to confine their love. I think of folks who have boldly and publicly lived their sobriety, living as a beacon of hope and change and transformation and new life for so many who struggle in the depths of addiction. I think of people who are profoundly changing the way we think about race and privilege, challenging our constructs of who is “in” and who is “out.”

And today, on Mother’s Day, I think of the woman who enabled me to become a mother. A prophet if I ever met one, I’ve invited her to share our story of expanding how Love works in her words:

Jenna Phillips

A story that started many years ago for two households has finally borne fruit. Six years ago, a wonderful person gave my wife Cate and I the best gift we have ever received and we conceived our sweet baby Xavier. What a miracle and blessing it was to create a life with the person you are in love with. It’s something we would never have been able to do without the generosity of a generous donor. It was not done in a clinic, but rather in our bed, in our home – with love, passion and intent. The entire experience was beyond what we could imagine. We were so blessed and happy.

Over the course of the next five years, we prayed, mediated and hoped to somehow find a way to return this energy into the universe. Many have asked “how can a person biologically help create a child, and have no desire for parental attachments?” I can only speak from my own perspective, fully understanding that this choice is not for everyone . . . and perhaps my answer is too simplistic. But this has been my intrinsic truth: My fertility has been a gift. My desire for others to experience this was strong. Being a surrogate, helping to grow a family, seemed like an essential step along my path.

When we entered into a pregnancy with the intention of creating another person’s child, we knew in our hearts that belonging doesn’t come from DNA being passed down from one source to another. It’s derived from the place in which you are destined to be. Therefore, a surrogate isn’t relinquishing her child to someone else. She is simply returning a child to their intended parents, collaborating with the sacred in the ancient act of creation.

Deciding to become a parent, despite the avenue, comes from a desire to love another person unconditionally, which is what I have done in my journey of motherhood in many different forms – gestating and birthing three children, loving my oldest whom my wife carried, and adopting my daughters. Serving as a surrogate came from that same place of love, all the while knowing that it would not be my love that would sustain her, but that of her intended parents.

The strength to do this drew on the love of my family, my wife, my children, and myself, but perhaps even more importantly, it came from our strong desire to listen to our purpose, to know our true calling, and to serve. The thing about love is this: there are countless definitions, illustrations, interpretations.

Love is boundless.

The hardest choice wasn’t whether or not I could do surrogacy. It was in discerning with whom I would walk this path. I consider myself fortunate because I made an impeccable choice. Or rather, I was chosen by this sweet angel to assist her in getting here. They say you can’t choose your family. But I disagree with this limited construct. Our lives have been immensely enriched by the family we choose to be a part of, the family we choose to be.

We are simply continuations of each other’s existence. Steadily evolving within the chapters of our collective lives. The strands that bind us are innumerable. Our shared experiences go beyond our shared blood.

It has been one of the greatest honors of my life to be a conduit of Divine Love in this unconventional but absolutely sacred way. A year ago this week, a little Earth Angel found her way to her mommy and daddy through me. May she always know she was created with the power of love. Who are we to limit how Divine Love manifests?

Bearing Fruit

Indeed, who are we to limit how Divine Love manifests? Jenna, a lesbian with teal and purple dreadlocks and tattoos from elbow to earlobe, might not be the first person someone would think of when picturing how God would crack this pastor's heart wide open, but I have never encountered anything more sacramental than the gift she bestowed upon Scott and me. She LITERALLY said, "this is my body, for you, that God's joy may be more complete in this world."

As our passage from the Acts of the Apostles exhibits, the human tendency to create "in" groups and "out" groups or "us" and "them" is as old as the hills, the tendency to imagine we know through whom or how God will work. AND, it is the prophetic witness of our faith that the Holy Spirit continually surprises us by breaking down those barriers, affecting transformation and grace and healing in unexpected places and the lives of those we have "othered."

I've shared this quote from Duane Priebe, who is Professor Emeritus at Wartburg Seminary before, but trying to claim that God's favor is exclusively for those who look and think and act and have experiences like you is so pervasive, it bears repeating: "Every time you draw a line between who's in and who's out, you'll find Jesus on the other side."

Thus, it becomes a prophetic act to draw the circle ever wider, to call both society and our personal relationships to continued broader inclusion and restoration. The intersection between our continued celebration of the season of Easter and our passage from the Gospel of John, then, is the bearing of fruit. The letter to the Galatians tells us that the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And so, if there is any value at all in gauging who is in and who is out, what behaviors and ideas and practices are of God and which are not, I would join together our two scripture passages for today: We will know those who are of God by their fruit. As the song says, "They will know we are Christians by our love."

Even if someone is not of our tribe or party or ideology, even if someone's ways seem very strange from our own, we will know their path is Godly by the love and joy and peace and patience and kindness that manifests through them. And furthermore, we will know that they are a prophet if they draw others to those fruits as well.

Conclusion

Friends, I asked Jenna to share our surrogacy story today in part because the way that she channeled love and joy and kindness and goodness, the Fruits of the Spirit, and knit them into flesh with her very life is the most prophetic embodiment of the Holy Spirit I have ever encountered. I invited her to share in part because her story is a witness to us all that doing profound acts of love is not beyond us. It's not something only other people do. Real life, normal people – people who do laundry and take their kids to tae-kwon-do and prefer to sleep in – can inspire society toward a more Godly path. And I asked her to share in part because our story stands as a witness that God works through people and situations that are so commonly othered.

And so, my prayer for all of us this week is that we will have the wisdom and the courage to manifest Divine Love in new and prophetic ways, that the seeds of God's peace, joy, justice, and healing will bear fruit because we've had the audacity to be faithful, not to the laws of humanity, not to the constructs of what is "in" and what is "out" but to the God of love.

May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

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