



Grace Lutheran
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SERMONS



SERMON for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Rev. Ronald Nelson

Texts: Jeremiah 1:4-19, Psalm 71:1-17,
I Corinthians 12:31-13:13, Luke 4:21-30

I suspect nobody really wants to be called upon to change. let alone promote that change to others. Is it too simple to say, that the people who are antivaxxers do not want to hear about Covid, so in some way, protesting against the shot says there is no covid, eh?

The prophets surely did not want to call for change and the people who heard Jesus preach acted like the antivaxxers of today. They were amazed at his “gracious words” and then when they realized what he was saying, they wanted to throw him off a cliff.

It’s kind of like Dr. Bonnie Henry here in BC. Can you imagine how anyone could be nicer than her? And then people slowly began to realize that she was telling us the truth. And yes, the truth hurts. How does the saying go? “Do not shoot the messenger.” but we do. Sad to say, the pastors that are the most popular, at least for a while, are those who, shall we say, “fudge” a little.

Today’s readings remind us that our faith is grounded in God’s word. This whole idea of “God’s word” is the basis for our Lutheran place in the scheme of the life of the whole church, but???

Faith in God’s word always involves the call to be and live differently. Our lesson from Corinthians today reminds us that just as God’s love sustained others, because we are equipped with spiritual gifts, especially love, we too are called to respond likewise.

I hate to say it but 1 Corinthians 13 has been overused and we probably do not even listen to it anymore. One of my gurus suggested recently that we use this text not only at weddings but funerals also. How would it work if we reflected back on our life with these words from Corinthians? I have to say I “shudder.”

So let us move on.

I will talk about humans as prophets but I have to reflect for a moment on a bigger picture. All of creation is prophetic because, from a faith perspective, all creation is infused with the prophetic and wise Spirit of the divine. Thus all creation communicates the wonder, the mystery, the complexity, the beauty of the divine which we heard last week in Psalm 19 and as Marty Haugen wrote:

The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and all creation is shouting for joy.
Come, dance in the forest, come, play in the field,
and sing, sing to the glory of the Lord.

In other words, as part of creation, human beings regardless of status, race, class, orientation, ethnicity, age, ability, gender, religious belief or no belief at all, have the potential to be prophetic and to act prophetically.

And then those of us who call ourselves Christians by virtue of our Baptism, are anointed into the prophetic tradition and are called to embrace and exercise our prophetic charism and vocation. Having this gift, then, invites people everywhere to speak to social, political and religious leadership, to judicial officials, power brokers, to those involved with the community's economy and well being.

Yes, we need to act prophetically to work for justice, to align ourselves with humans and nonhumans who are living on the margins, and we must try to decenter and eventually dismantle those power structures and leaders who lord it over others.

Now that is obviously a tall order and the trouble is there is always another group willing to fill the gap. So, it seems like the protester of today becomes the dominant leader of tomorrow and we are back where we started. Can we ever have simple democracy?

Remember, Jesus started off well enough (in last Sunday's reading), promising to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy by restoring sight to the blind, releasing the captive, proclaiming the year of God's favour, and all the rest. And then he continues the theme in today's Gospel. At first the people spoke well of him, but then Jesus refused to temper his answers to their expectations. Instead, Jesus reminded his neighbours of all the mighty deeds God had/has done in all the wrong places on behalf of all the wrong people:

a foreign widow was the only one aided during a famine.

an enemy commander was the only leper healed during the
occupation and war.

and those stories are just the tip of the iceberg.

Jesus' sermon in Nazareth was his ministry in miniature.

Jesus' job will be misunderstood, downplayed, and disrespected throughout Luke's Gospel which we will mainly be hearing this year.

Jesus was born to an unwed mother.

They spent their first days in a barn.

he then wandered around the rural backwater of Galilee.

Galilee, the place where we will be told to go back to when we think we have it made, when we think we have it all together.

His followers included fishermen, hungry peasants, prostitutes
and tax collectors.

His signs/miracles were just as likely to occur on the wrong side of
the tracks as the right side, wherever that is.

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He was insulted the very scribes and pharisees that could help his prospects.

Yes, it is no wonder that Jesus attracted the attention of Herod and the Romans and eventually died a lonely death. Yes, speaking truth to power will not win many friends. They will agree with you until they will not. Even the people at Nazareth, his own people, tried to throw him off a cliff. Jesus simply refused, at every turn, to do the things his neighbours thought the son of Joseph should do.

What does this say to us today, about the people on the front line who are harassed for doing their job? I have mentioned this before.

We as Lutherans believe in the priesthood of all believers, that whether or not we are ordained we are called to do important, godly work. Martin Luther praised the vocations of princes but also of the shoemaker, the tailor, the maids, insisting that all of us serve God when we help and serve our neighbour. Putting out fires, caring for one another, planting trees, and even playing sports can glorify God, even if sometimes the work we do benefits the unworthy or the plain enemy.

Yes, Jesus was not afraid to thwart expectations to do the work of the kingdom. [thwart, I like that word.] Quite frankly, I think we need to thwart a couple of people here in Canada and afar, or (what I believe is) democracy will not be.

Preschoolers and people of Nazareth may value a lot of things differently, but I think Jesus' bold speech and unconventional career makes way for preachers, dog walkers and all the rest. As followers of Jesus, we are not guaranteed acceptance. Instead, I believe, we are invited to join Jesus beyond the boundaries, fulfilling the scriptures in all sorts of surprising and important ways.

Putting our lessons from Jeremiah and Jesus together today, we must act prophetically, to expose inequity and discrimination of all types. Put Jeremiah and Jesus together and we see our prophetic call is to the nations and our prophetic work must span the whole globe.

The heavens are telling the glory of God,
and all creation is shouting for joy.

This current pandemic is making us reset our global economy. Covid-19 is said to be the cause of political, economic and social disruptions. As we know, the pandemic has exposed the inconsistencies, inadequacies and contradictions of multiple systems.

Our two little granddaughters, that I mentioned last week, love grandma's Rice Krispies' squares but the shelves are empty. What can a person do? Maybe the antivaxxer truckers will bring some Rice Krispies back. Did you see: Her Majesty's loyal opposition led by Pierre Poilievre, Candice Bergen, Andrew Scheer and even Donald Trump Jr are supporting the truckers. Next thing you know they will be in Washington DC supporting the overthrow of the USA government. At least Neil Young and Doug Ford have more sense than that.

Well, one person has said, “we are muddled in confusion and mired with difficulties because we have chosen to listen to politicians rather than prophets.” Just like in Nazareth, politicians are largely dependent upon his/her ability to say what people want to hear. A prophet’s success on the other hand is usually measured by his/her willingness to risk saying what people need to hear. Prophets have a way of rubbing raw the sensibilities of their listeners and irritating their consciences with the truth.

Walter Brueggemann, in his book “The Prophetic Imagination” explained it back in 1975 (just like yesterday, eh?):

“It was the task of Jeremiah and Jesus, and it remains the task of all prophetic ministry, to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception which is an alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominate culture in which believers find themselves.” This alternative consciousness and perception is not rooted in social theory or in righteous indignation but in the genuine alternative, which is God. In other words, prophets are not simply investigative reporters who root out social inequities and injustices and castigate their perpetrators. Rather, prophets arouse within their listeners an alternative consciousness which, in turn, perceives, understands, appreciates and evaluates reality according to the will, word, and the wisdom of God. Now I realize all of the above is beyond, as they say, our pay grade. But this is today’s issue.

Jesus and Jeremiah and a host of others faced/face opposition. This is where our Second Lesson from Corinthians comes into play. There is an alternative lifestyle which comes into play if we learn to love one another with an authentic, Christ-inspired love.

We are invited today, to decide whether to listen to the politicians and others, and often accept a skewed, or, at best, a partisan view of reality, or to heed to the prophets among us.

the words of a prophet may chide us,
their message may shock us,
their delivery may not always be pleasant or timely,
but the prophets will put us in touch with the only viable alternative we have with
which to face suffering, evil, injustice, destruction and death,
and that alternative, as trifle as it may sound, is the Word made flesh,
that is, God among us.

longing for light, we wait in darkness.
longing for truth, we turn to you.
make us your own, your holy people,
light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light!
shine in our hearts.
shine through the darkness.
Christ be our light!
shine in your church gathered today.

Amen.

~ Reverend Ronald Nelson