

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 29, 2019

Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Luke 16:19-31;

Rev. Joel M. Krueger

"The Prophetic Voice"

In our gospel reading today, Jesus clearly is speaking with a prophetic voice. Speaking out prophetically must be one of the most difficult and challenging things a preacher can do. It sets you apart. It usually causes you to be misunderstood. It gets you into trouble and makes you unpopular, if indeed you were at all popular before. It puts you at great risk, because the message of the prophet is always one that people, the vast majority of us, don't want to hear!

Speaking prophetically is what happens when one knows what is right, what is just, what the God-inspired message truly is, when no one else is talking about it. And in Luke's gospel, Jesus speaks prophetically all the time. In fact, we could say that Luke himself is speaking prophetically throughout his whole gospel, not only through the mouth of Jesus, but through others as well.

Listen to the voice of the young girl Mary, the mother of Jesus, while he was yet in her womb: *"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden."* (1:46-48) Here, this young woman, of no consequence, who holds no position of power, who aspires to no great thing, who possesses a humility before God and all people, who understands how low she sits on the cultural ladder - she's a nobody really - here she speaks with excitement and conviction, because she feels noticed by her God.

And she speaks a truth that she knows firmly in her heart, that her God brings a justice to the earth that turns everything on its head, turns it upside down, everything that the powerful and the rich and the influential think they have set right. She declares to all who will listen, *"[God] has shown strength with his arm, [God] has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, [God] has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; [God] has filled the hungry with good things and the rich [God] has sent empty away."* (1:51-53).

We also hear John the Baptist speaking similar words of divine reversal. We hear Simon Peter declare Jesus as *"the Christ of God"* (9:20) before anyone else recognizes it. And we have in Jesus a prophet who heals the sick and lame, who touches the untouchable lepers and women deemed unclean by their illness. He feeds the hungry masses and speaks with the marginalized and those labeled "sinners." He restores to life the children of religious leaders and of poor widows. There was no hierarchy or favoritism in Jesus' ministry, and he brought the mercy and love and compassion and kindness of God to all he met.

Yet, he also brought the hard words, the reproving parables, the shocking lessons, to the religious people of his time, to the Pharisees and to people who may not have been too unlike ourselves. People who may have thought they were doing it right all along but who were somehow missing the real point of it all.

To such he brought this story of the rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. It is a story about contrasts and separation. About rich and poor. The well clothed, sumptuously fed and the hungry, adorned with a garment of sores. It is about how people can be so consumed with themselves that they have no awareness of, and completely ignore, their neighbor, who sits right outside their gate. It's about our greed and preoccupation with our own personal wealth and wellbeing, our need to satisfy our own appetites, that we take no notice of the hunger of the one right next to us, making them invisible.

And it speaks of that great divide, that chasm, that is wrought in this life, but carries over to the next, but with a just reversal. So that the one who in this life, the one who "had", now "has not", and the one who "had not", now "has." That chasm is a thing we in our day, need to pay much attention to. In a world where the gap between rich and poor has grown exponentially. In an era where communication technology that promises to connect us, actually isolates us further and further from each other. And in a time when our political allegiances that should unite us and make us stronger have instead polarized and set us against one another, making us weaker and more vulnerable.

We need to hear the prophetic voices of our time! We need to open our ears then and we have to listen and learn from them.

Most recently, Kate and I have been impressed by the voice of a young woman speaking truth to power. You have heard of 16 year old Greta Thunberg of Sweden. We believe she is a present day prophet. Hear her powerful, heartfelt words, spoken to the U.N. Climate Action Summit in New York this past Monday: *"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!"*

She is speaking the hard words. She is saying the things that many do not want to hear. She is putting herself at great risk. She is speaking with the prophetic voice. Are we listening?

As those who follow in the way of Jesus Christ, we too are called to speak with the prophetic voice. But before we speak, we need to name those things that we feel called to address and to raise to one another and to the world. And we may not always agree on what needs to be addressed or on how to deal with the issues at hand, but we need to listen to one another, and seek to understand each other's concerns. That is how we begin to close that great chasm that exists between so many of us. So, I invite you to share your thoughts. Let's share together the concerns we have been holding within us, right now, right here. Let's start the conversation:

What are some of the things you feel we need to speak to in this time?

And are you hearing any prophetic voices raising these concerns?

The prophet Jeremiah had spoken the hard words, had spoken with the prophetic voice to the people of Judah and it got him into trouble. He was imprisoned. Even worse, Jerusalem was surrounded by the Babylonian army and there was little hope for the inhabitants of the city. It would soon fall and all their people would be taken into captivity as slaves in a foreign land. But even knowing this, even after all his preaching and warning and proclaiming God's judgment upon them, he had a vision. A vision for a future hope. And to express that, he didn't preach, he didn't condemn. He acted. He bought a field. He bought a piece of land when the land was about to be taken away, and declared, *"For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."*

Like Jeremiah, like Jesus after him, like so many that have lead us in the right way, we need not only speak with the prophetic voice, warning of the dangers around us, but also lift the vision, the hope, and take the lead in living in the way God is calling us to go. May God bless us with courage and wisdom, with unity of purpose and with a shared vision, so that together we may turn this crazy world upside down and reverse the ways of evil, deceit and corruption, to the ways of God's justice and mercy. Amen.