

“Keep the Change!”
Mark 6:1-13

The story is told about a bishop who was interviewing a senior seminarian, asking where he would like to be assigned as a deacon. The seminarian said, somewhat boldly, "Oh, bishop, anywhere but New Canaan." "Why not there," the bishop asked? "You know," the seminarian answered, "that's my hometown -- and we all know that a prophet cannot be honored in his homeland." The bishop ended the meeting by remarking, "Don't worry my friend, nobody is going to confuse you with a prophet."

“A prophet is not accepted in his own home.” This was the way Jesus responded to the rejection he received in his hometown of Nazareth. The rejection was so great that the Gospel of Mark reports to us that Jesus was not even able to perform miracles among his people. But why is a prophet not accepted in his own home congregation or hometown? Why were prophets like Elijah, Elisha, and Isaiah despised? Elijah and Elisha could do no miracle in their regions because the people didn't believe in them. Elijah and Elisha had to go elsewhere to find true faith. The same was true of Jesus because people took offense at his words and actions.

Why was Jesus rejected by his own community? At first they were okay with him and even admired his strength (Mark 1). Shouldn't they be proud of him for all that he has accomplished? Think about the example of Tim Russart. When he died last year, everyone was sad in this area. We liked to claim our connection to him because he was a good man. He was a hometown hero. But what about others from this area that we would like to forget that they are connected to us? Most of us would like to forget that OJ Simpson played for our beloved Bills' team. So, what was so upsetting about Jesus? Prophets were often people who challenged the injustices and unfaithfulness of a society. They were not easy to deal with. Greek, *pro + ph-e t - e s*—literally, one who speaks “on behalf of.” A prophet speaks on behalf of God, as God's messenger and on behalf of those who have no one to speak for them, giving a voice to the voiceless. A prophet is not primarily a fore-teller, but a truth-teller. They had deep insights into the present. Jesus fit the bill:

1. He was challenging the status quo, systems of dominations and oppression.
2. He opened healing to those on the bottom of the social system: Women, lepers, and those with illness that made them unclean.
3. He went to the other side of the lake to the Gentiles and offered them healing.
4. He challenged the authority of the Roman Empire and the leadership of the synagogue that went along with that system of domination.

And the list went on and on. He was just not going to fit into their scheme of doing things properly. He was an agitator. Then right after the episode in the synagogue, Jesus re-commissions his followers by sharing in his style of radical ministry. He sent them to live as he lived, being hosted by sympathetic locals, living very simply. They were to do as Jesus did: proclaiming the reign of God and living it by healings and exorcisms, setting the oppressed free. They were to be bearers of that kind of good news in word and deed. What a challenge it must have been for the people of Jesus' time! We can look back and say, how could they not have seen what he was trying to do? How could they have resisted such good change that he was bringing them?

But if we are truly honest with ourselves, we know that we don't always see the change that God brings to our lives as positive. We don't always see prophets who challenge us to greater faithfulness and justice as a great gift. In fact, as Presbyterians even though we are steeped in the Reformation tradition of change and reform, we often times find ourselves resisting change

just as much as anybody else. The joke is told about Presbyterians, “How many Presbyterian does it take to change a light bulb?” Answer: “. . . *Change !?! . . .*”

In hindsight we can always be prophetic, but it is a lot harder to be prophetic when the message of justice about certain issues are unpopular or controversial. It is said that “Prophets are best when they are far away and long ago,” because prophets challenge us and call us to change. Prophets are difficult because they don’t keep change just to themselves. They challenge their communities. They are in your face. Like, in a family that is entertaining visitors when the child keeps asking why do we have to say grace because our family never does that when we are alone. A prophet keeps the will of God before the people – the need for justice, the need to follow God in obedience, the reality of life through death, the need to not to make materialism or capitalism or any of the other ‘isms’ as our gods. A prophet keeps going on about expecting great things. This usually makes most of us uncomfortable.

Think about the prophets of our country and how they made people uncomfortable because they called for change. As we celebrate the 4th of July today, we remember the many people, prophets and saints, who challenged our country to greater freedom and justice. Even the Revolutionary war was only supported by 40-45% of the population. At first, not everyone thought it was a good idea to seek independence from England. We look back today on their movements for justice and social change and think of how great they were, but while they were going on, they were not seen that way. For example, in the women’s movement for the right to vote, when Susan B. Anthony illegally voted for the re-election of Ulysses S. Grant for President in Rochester, NY. in 1872, she was arrested, jailed and fined. The judge dismissed the jury and rendered a verdict of guilty as charged. Another great example was Martin Luther King, Jr. and his struggle in the Civil Rights movement. Even pastors didn’t support his efforts. When he was arrested and put in jail, they made a statement that his activities were “unwise and untimely.”

We resist prophetic visions because we are afraid of losing what is known and safe, even though it may be unjust. We are afraid of failure and afraid of change. We guard our comfort zones so that nothing can get to us. In his book *Awareness*, the Jesuit priest, writer, and teacher, Anthony De Mello notes “It’s not that we fear the unknown. You cannot fear something that you do not know. Nobody is afraid of the unknown. What you really fear is the loss of the known.” Yet our calling as Christians is to always let go of our comfort zones and allow creativity to be our way. Even when it comes to our personal lives, our vocations, we have a rigid understanding of God’s will, as if there is only one right way and we need to follow it. Who are the prophets in our day today? Do you listen to your inner prophet? When you feel a nudge to explore a new way of life, a new career, a new relationship, or a new project that you know will enhance life, do you listen and trust or do you hold back and get scared? Do you live your life with a sense of abundance and freedom or do you calculate every step and every consequence?

In his book, *Holy Play*, Professor Kirk Byron Jones notes that, “Purpose is not something we passively receive from God; purpose is something we actively create with God...this statement challenges the traditional Christian belief, more recently popularized in the book *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren, that discerning our life’s purpose is a matter of praying and waiting for God to show us what to do. My view of purpose calls into question the notion that vocational discernment is primarily a matter of receiving pre-written vocational scripts from God. I am convinced that this prevailing belief has had an unintended numbing effect, preventing many of us from perceiving and practicing God’s greatest gift: creative freedom...If God wanted to live your life for you, God would not have created you in the first place...with a universe as abundant

and vast as ours, why would we think that when it comes to purpose, God would have only one or two things for us to do in life that we must painstakingly discern among all that appears before us?"

As we are called and sent in the name and example of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are invited to see life as an adventure and to open up to the possibilities of service and prophetic ministry without the fear of upsetting the system, without the fear of the unknown, and without the fear of failure. In fact, sometimes failure is our best opportunity to let go of what is comfortable and familiar. The name of John James Audubon is forever associated with the magnificent paintings he made of the birds of North America. No one else has so accurately painted the birds and the natural environment in which they were found. It might not have happened had he not gone bankrupt in business! In 1808, he opened a store in Louisville, Kentucky. It was after he went bankrupt in 1819 that he began traveling and painting birds. We are all richer because of his business failure. When we listen to the exalting music of Handel's Messiah, we usually assume it was surely written by a man at the pinnacle of his success, but that is not the case. In fact, it was written after he had suffered a stroke. It was written while Handel lived in poverty amid bleak surroundings. He had suffered through a particularly deep night of gloom and despair over his failure as a musician, and the next morning he unleashed his creative genius in a musical score that continues to thrill and inspire us generations later.

I would like to end with the benediction that is on the cover of our bulletin:

May God bless us with discomfort

at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships,
so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger

at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that we may work for economic justice for all people.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer
from pain, hunger, homelessness and rejection,

so that we may reach out our hand to comfort them
and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness

to believe that we can make a difference in the world
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done

Franciscan Benediction