

“Prophet on the Edge”
Luke 4:21-30 (Jeremiah 1:4-10)

The 19th Century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard once said that many great minds of his century had given themselves to making people’s lives easier -- inventing labor-saving machines and devices. He said that he would dedicate himself to making people’s lives more difficult. He would become a preacher.

With this, Kierkegaard and others saw the need for the preacher to challenge people to greater faithfulness whether in their personal lives or in their public lives. Yet, often times we find pastors and even congregations wanting to always agree with each other and not allowing much room for difference, especially when it comes to hot button issues where people have a lot of strong feelings about an issue. Even in our personal lives, this presents a challenge for us when we disagree with our family members. How do we have peaceful Thanksgiving or Christmas dinners with our family members if topics such as politics or religion come up? Sometimes, we are forced to hide or abandon a part of ourselves in order to keep the peace. Recently I was with a group of pastors and one of them shared with us his deep struggles in his current ministry. This young man loved nature and God’s creation. He cared deeply about the environment, while he pastored a congregation in an area where the national forest is in danger because of logging and drilling for gas. This young pastor struggles because he would like to address the environmental issues facing his community, while at the same time, he is constrained because he feels that most people in his congregation would take offense at even bringing the subject up for discussion. How do we deal with such situations? Conflict and disagreement are normal parts of life. But how do we deal with them?

Our Bible story for today is that of a great conflict. As I mentioned last week, after Jesus proclaimed Jubilee for the people in the synagogue and called them to practice economic justice in their communities, people had a hard time with his message, especially the religious leaders. Today we hear the rest of the story, the part where the conflict escalates to the point where the people are filled with rage and they are ready to throw Jesus off a cliff. I am thankful that so far I have never preached a sermon that enraged people to that point! But I am amazed at the example which Jesus leaves us. He not only preached something they did not want to hear about, but he also persisted to challenge them even when he sensed that they were getting upset with him. Didn’t he realize that what he was saying amounted to fighting words with his people? He first tells them about Jubilee and then he tells them about the widow of Zarephath and Naaman, the Syrian General. To us, his words don’t seem that offensive because after all these are biblical stories, one involving the Prophet Elijah and the other involving the Prophet Elisha. But to the people of his time, bringing up those examples was an insult. Both stories highlight the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel and how the message and healing of God went to people outside the faith. Both the widow and Naaman were not part of the people of Israel. They were Gentiles, outsiders to the faith, yet were receptive of God’s love and gifts. It was as if Jesus was reminding the people of Nazareth of the times when they did not have faith. They failed to see God’s presence in their midst. As a result, the prophets of God had to go to the outsiders because they were more open to God.

So, was Jesus picking a fight? Did he not care that the people were filled with rage? I think an important piece that we often miss in this story is the way Jesus did his ministry. In his prophetic role, Jesus saw that speaking truth to them was an alternative to violence. He was not picking a fight. In fact, his response to their rage was not aggressive or violent. He just passed through them. What he did was speak the truth that God has put on his heart without resorting to

violence. What an incredible example for us to see a way where we can speak our truth without the need to be violent towards those with whom we disagree. This was the long standing tradition of prophets in ancient Israel. The office of the prophet was to be a kind of check and balance in the alliance between the political power and the religious establishment. The prophet's calling was to speak truth to power. In her book, *The Cloister Walk*, Presbyterian author Kathleen Norris notes that, "A prophet's task is to reveal the fault lines hidden beneath the comfortable surface of the worlds we invent for ourselves, the national myths as well as the little lies and delusions of control and security that get us through the day." They were not trouble makers. Prophets had a specific role which reminded Israel of their calling to be the people of God. Prophets did not simply predict the future. They focused on speaking for God, delivering the message to people. Sometimes, the prophets needed to speak a word of judgment when the people lost their focus on God and justice. At other times, the prophets were called to speak a word of hope when the people needed encouragement to continue the journey of faith. In his book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."

This is what Jesus was doing with his people. He was calling them out of their sleep, out of their conformity to the unjust practices of their culture to remember that their faithfulness to God was the center of their existence and ethical behavior.

We are called to this ministry of prophetic consciousness, where our vision of the world is not based on what is popular or accepted by society, but is based in our deep love for God and neighbor. This was a tough calling for the people of Jesus' time and it is a tough calling for us today. We have not evolved much since the time in Nazareth. We still struggle with how to deal with those prophetic voices in our lives and in our world. In his book, *Civility*, Yale Professor Stephen Carter reflects on the need for civility in our culture today. Carter calls for several practices in our culture where people can embrace and engage their differences and come out stronger as a result of that. One of the points he makes is the need for listening to all the voices, even those who seem far off base for us, "Civil dialogue over differences is democracy's true engine: we must disagree in order to debate, and we must debate in order to decide, and we must decide in order to move...Civility does not require consensus on everything. Civility and disagreement can both thrive at the same time. Civility assumes that we will disagree; it requires us not to mask our differences but resolve them respectfully." Carter uses some hot button issues in our society today such as abortion and politics to show how difficult it is for us to listen to each other. Yet, civility requires that we engage our differences and not ignore them, "Those who disagree with us, even on the issues that matter most, are not necessarily evil –they may just be misguided...we, like those with whom we disagree, are mortal and thus face the possibility of error."

Why is this important to us today? I believe it is important because what is at stake here is the truth. We need each other to speak the truth as we know it because in that sharing, we are able to move closer to the eternal truth of God. In his book, *The Company of Strangers*, Quaker theologian Parker Palmer notes that "At the heart of any authentic religious experience is recognition that God's nature is too huge, God's movement too deep, ever to be comprehended by a single conception or point of view....God's truth is singular and eternal, but the forms in which we give it expression are as finite and fragile as clay pots, and we must always be ready to break them open on behalf of a larger vision of truth."

There is always the illusion in our world that one group or one person or even one side of the issue has the full truth. We have to be vigilant to guard ourselves from this falsehood because it often leads us to violence. The best guard that I know of is speaking our truth while still being able to listen with openness to the truth of others knowing that we may be wrong. There is a new word in our culture. It is called truthiness. It started back in 2004 when one of our most celebrated comedians, Stephen Colbert, laid the basis for a comic twist to the phrase, speaking truth to power. Instead, Colbert said, "speaking truthiness to power." Indeed, "truthiness" was voted as the 2005 "word of the year" by a panel of American linguists. And this is how they defined truthiness: "the quality of stating concepts or facts one wishes or believes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true." [<http://politicalhumor.about.com/>] Colbert says that, "It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that's not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all."

The pressures are often great on us to see the world from a certain perspective and to not listen to anything that could challenge our views. Today, we ordained and installed officers of the church who are called to serve the church in specific functions. One of the things we always pray for is their ability to listen to God's voice and to speak the truth of God's love even when it may be unpopular to do so. We talk about this saying that God alone is the Lord of the conscience. Yet, at the same time, we also remember that we are all in need of each other because the truth is much bigger than any one person's views or experiences.

Jesuit Priest Anthony de Mello tells this story about a village leader who had an accident and lost the use of his legs. He took to walking on crutches. He gradually developed the ability to move with speed –even to dance and execute little moves for the entertainment of his neighbors. Then he took it into his head to train his children in the use of crutches. It soon became a status symbol in the village to walk on crutches, and before long everyone was doing so. By the fourth generation, no one in the village could walk without crutches. The village school included "Crutchery: theoretical and applied" in its curriculum, and the village craftsmen became famous for the quality of the crutches they produced. There was even talk of developing an electronic, battery-operated set of crutches! One day, a young man presented himself before the village elders, and demanded to know why everyone had to walk on crutches, since God had provided people with legs to walk on. The village elders were amused that this upstart should think himself wiser than them, so they decided to teach him a lesson. "Why don't you show us how?" they said. "Agreed," cried the young man. A demonstration was fixed for the following Sunday at the village square. Everyone was there when the young man hobbled on his crutches to the middle of the square, stood upright, and dropped his crutches. A hush fell on the crowd as he took a bold step forward and fell flat on his face. With that, everyone was confirmed in their belief that it was quite impossible to walk without the help of crutches.

May we always be open to speak and hear the prophetic vision of God whenever we are called to do so. Amen.