

# Living the Prophetic Life in Ourselves

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But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed . . . But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture ? "I believed, and so I spoke" ? we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into God's presence." (II Cor. 4:7-9; 13-14)

It is such a pleasure to be here in Wisconsin for this event for many reasons. Wisconsin is the Conference that first gave me a place from which to envision the kind of church that I still hope for in my mind's eye. This is the home that nurtured me and sent me forth into ministry. I have always been proud of Wisconsin, for it has felt that this Conference has worked diligently to be faithful to the call of the gospel. In its better moments, this Conference has stepped out on the edge and has provided the kind of home and shelter that encourages forthrightness, intellectual discourse, and genuine ministry. For these kinds of witnesses to the broader community I am ever thankful.

Likewise, it occurs to me that this event, Kairos CoMotion ? the bringing together of wisdom and worship and hope and nurture ? is also something for which Wisconsin ought to be proud. For those who are leaders in this place, I offer a personal word of thanks. Know and believe that you are making a difference, not only in the life of this conference, but in the life of the United Methodist Church. On behalf of many whose voices remain silent, I publicly want to thank you for taking the kind of risk that makes events like these embody grace and meaning in a world where there is too little of either ? grace or meaning.

This morning I hope to affirm some realities, raise some questions, and perhaps, in the process, encourage the ongoing task of discernment about how to live faithfully as individuals and as a church. In some ways, I suspect I am preaching to the choir; but how wonderful it is to have the voices of a choir to remind one another about the struggles and joys of faithful living. Ultimately I am not as concerned simply about the call to be a faithful and

progressive individual Christian; rather I am concerned about the ways in which individual calls hold us together in community, beckoning us toward honesty about self, other, and God. The call I am most interested in nurturing is the one that embodies the gospel in churches where they really believe in and act out the United Methodist tagline: "open hearts, open minds, and open doors."

When I imagine what that church would look like ? the one with open doors and hearts and minds? I imagine the faces of some of the people that I have met over the years. Many of these folks seek to live as faithfully as anyone sitting in this room; yet these are also folks who have had a hard time experiencing the goodness of the grace of God in the church, often feeling as if they have to choose between care and nurture for their spiritual lives and church participation. Caring for one's soul and faithful participation in church feel incompatible to so very many people I know. The faces of some of these people continue to prompt and spur me on to think passionately and fully about the prophetic call of God in this life.

When I served a church in Platteville, Wisconsin, someone invited me ? perhaps it was my colleague, Lance Herrick ? to sit in the church pew for a few minutes during the week and to imagine the faces of the people that were a part of that church. Reflecting on the texts for the week and the sermon that was taking shape in my head and my heart was always grounded in the lives that were represented in that church. This presentation this morning has many faces embedded in the walls of my mind:

- The face of a young man -- white, middle-class, well-educated ? who journeys to

seminary because he hears the call of God in his life to ministry. Yet, while the person who appears on the outside seems to have all of those qualities seminaries and Boards of Ministries look for in potential leaders for the church, he carries on the inside the scars of a closet that is too small and weighty for his spiritual life to do much beyond surviving. The idea of thriving in the context of the church is more than he can imagine at this point in his life.

- The face of a mother whose daughter is an ordained minister, but who cannot share much about her daughter's life. The church where this mother spends her daily life and to which she pours out her time and energy is not prepared to accept and affirm her daughter-minister who has lived in a covenantal relationship with another woman for over twenty years.
- The face of a family whose adopted bi-racial children are a part of a well-meaning church that wants to accept and be open, but isn't quite sure how to receive, welcome, affirm, or celebrate their lives together. The problem is not the children whose beauty appears in the very breadth of their smiles and love of their laughter; rather the problem is that the parents of these two children are two women whose living together seems inappropriate to some in the church.
- The face of a middle-aged man who has always been a part of a local church, active and vital in the congregation. Yet he has also felt that he was born in the wrong body. He has not the financial means to pursue therapy in order to move toward a process of transformation. Instead, he tries to live two separate lives in two separate parts of the community, wondering all the time when he will be "found out," worrying that the church that has nurtured him will abandon him when they discover his secret life.
- The face of a local church that genuinely wants to embrace the attitude of "open doors, open hearts, and open minds," as long

as those who walk through the doors are more like them than not. What would they do, after all, if someone totally "different" wanted to lead worship, or pray in ways foreign to the congregation, or get "married" in a traditional service but not be a traditional couple?

- The faces contained in a Jurisdictional or General Conference ? each one trying to discern how to walk the lines between the complex agendas in front of them: competing issues of justice and peace, combating racism, moving toward global inclusiveness in decision-making, and wrestling with how to be a life-giving place for lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered communities.

Every one of the lives represented in this kaleidoscope of faces is a genuine and gifted individual. Few of them would assume that they are living a prophetic life, although their existence in and of itself is something quite prophetic. They have not, for the most part, decided to be on the front lines of issues in the church, nor have they decided to make public statements about their choices or about their children or about their experiences. They are certainly not perfect people, but they are people of an ordinary, yet incredible faith. It is a faith that invites them into honesty and struggle. It is also the faith that sustains them in the midst of bruised and shattered souls.

Living as a transgendered, bisexual, lesbian or gay person in our church is a struggle. Yet, while it is difficult, it is also true that we are not the only ones whose issues of justice and rightness demand a prophetic voice. No, there are many, many others ? women and men whose ethnicity is non-European who struggle to find a space and place in this church whether they are African-American, Native American, Latino/Latina, Asian, or some other blend; women and children who live lives of private terror in their homes and wonder when the church will end its silence about domestic and intimate partner violence while the church seems eager to endorse wars to fight terror in other nations; families who live in the kind of poverty in our neighborhoods and communities that should make us stop and wonder how we allow ourselves to sleep

at night while they are fighting for their daily sustenance; uninsured workers whose minimum wage jobs offer just enough hours to keep them alive but are below the minimum level necessary for benefits, putting them and their families in a constant state of peril; and the list could go on and on and on and on. Injustices and oppression surround us at every turn. And, the structures that keep those oppressions intact in our churches are intimately connected and inter-woven.

But, this morning, I want to focus on the lives of those caught in the conflict-ridden energy of our church by their genetic codes and their choices ? lesbians, gay men, bisexual and transgendered persons. I do so for three reasons: First, the issues named above and many like them overlap in the structures of oppression that keep people silent and in their places and keep us all less than whole. If we try to focus on all of them at once we are likely to lose ourselves in the global-ness and hopelessness of universalisms without context. Hence, by addressing one issue specifically my hope is that this issue can provide insights into what it means to live prophetically as we work together to eradicate racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression.

Second, this issue like the others exemplifies both the sin of fear and exclusiveness *and* the redemptive possibility of the church. If we can find ways to speak out loud the truths of our corporate lives ? whether it be about race or gender or class or homosexuality ? then, just perhaps, we can get on with other meaningful work God is waiting for us to do in this world. But, we are so afraid to speak because we know that we will be sought out, stripped of our ministries or our orders or our places of being or our communities of solidarity and solitude. The local churches and congregations of this United Methodist Church, its publishing house, our seminaries, and sometimes our church leaders are afraid because this issue is "divisive" ? or at least we have been led to believe that it is so. And there are few things worse in the eyes of our collective church than that of being divisive, even when the conflicts that arise might lead us to more redemptive ways of being the church. Hence, our fear captures and captivates us, holding us all hostage ? parents don't talk about their gay children; lesbians and gay men don't talk about their

partnerships or their holy unions or their desire to raise children; bisexual and transgendered people for the most part can't even get a hearing because of all the din in the room. It is as if we are afraid that by speaking the realities of our lives we will somehow move the church to make a choice that will divide and conquer rather than inspire and transform.

The sadness is that our fear bids us into complacency and silence, except that every four years the debate heats up just a bit until it culminates in a large gathering we call General Conference. When that is over, we return things to normal and people are found back in their places ? or their closets ? once again. I suppose that for some there is nothing worse than hearing God's truth from our neighbors and from ourselves when that truth might lead us to repentance and to change, inviting us to embrace doors that honestly swing wide and open. It is difficult to experience grace when one is afraid to live one's life or be one's self in this church. I speak about the BGLT community not because that issue is bigger than any other, but because that issue is so illustrative of the pain and fear of genuinely open doors, hearts, and minds.

Third, I use this issue because it is closest to my own passions and heart and to what I feel God has called me to be and to do ? it is one of my issues, if you will. I think, teach, reflect, write, live, and work with folks for whom being lesbian/gay/bisexual or transgendered is more than a casual detail about life but is bound up with what it means to be created as a child of a living and dynamic God. Many of us believe in a liberative and active God at work in the universe, One that is even active in the United Methodist Church and the church universal, and One that provokes us into deeper levels of honesty so that we might be made more aware of the truths by which we are to live.

I have been asked to wrestle with how those of us who are ordinary human beings live the prophetic life in ourselves? To live the prophetic life in ourselves is to seek, find, embrace, nurture, and respect the embodiment of God's love in the very core of our being. By so doing, ultimately we are liberated and freed to move beyond ourselves and into the world. The prophetic life requires that we know the God who lives and dwells in us and who

invites us, persuades us, and moves us into the world as whole and holy people. We are obligated to do our own internal work ? the work of our soul ? in order to be authentic prophets in our daily walk. Perhaps the question can be put this way: How do we come to be so much at home within our soul and so much aware of God's soul within us that we can do nothing less than live and speak prophetically?

Being at home in our soul means intentionally trusting in God's presence in such a way that living prophetically is a central part of who we are. There are several aspects of our spiritual life that shape and form this central identity in God. I am going to talk about five of them this morning. Because sometimes it is helpful to have a "trick" (especially on Halloween) through which to frame these spiritual elements, I have devised an acronym that spells out the word "VOICE." Thinking about how God calls us to use our voice, to speak to ourselves and about ourselves with honesty and integrity is essential for those who would dare to listen and respond to the prophetic call of God. You must remember, after all, that my field and discipline is that of pastoral care. As a caregiver in the context of the church I am certain that there are times God calls us to tend to ourselves and our souls in order that we may be better instruments of God's wisdom in the world. Knowing and caring about ourselves is not sloppy individualism or nihilism gone amuck; rather it is recognizing that in our very being we are created in the image of a God who invites us to wholeness.

So, let us think together about how we come to be at home in our soul with our Voice ? not only through the words we speak aloud, but through the actions that speak on our behalf as well.

### **Vocation**

I am privileged to teach in a seminary that still believes in and talks about notions of call and vocation. Every year as new seminarians arrive on campus we invite them to a retreat where we ponder what it means to be called to be a student in discernment, rather than simply called to jump through hoops toward ordination. Hence, every fall I ponder the meaning of this word, "vocation".

What I am certain of is that vocation has less to do with what I do for a living or who writes my check so that I can pay my bills and more to do with how I live a holy and whole life. What I am also certain of is that vocation calls us to be more honest with ourselves than we might otherwise be. Such honesty requires us to recognize and affirm our gifts and graces, as well as our shortcomings and failings. Vocation demands that we seek an inner truth that is recognizable when we hear the voice of the God within us rather than listening and depending only on the voices of others from the outside telling us who we ought to be and what we ought to do.

I have found much help over the years from Parker Palmer. In his collection of essays, *Let Your Life Speak* (2000), Palmer addresses this aspect of vocation by saying the following:

Today I understand vocation quite differently ? not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice "out there" calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice "in here" calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God.

It is a strange gift, this birthright gift of self. Accepting it turns out to be even more demanding than attempting to become someone else! (*Let Your Life Speak*, p. 10-11)

Palmer is accurate when he notes the difficulty of accepting the birthright of God's gracious gift of self. It seems so much easier to listen to others and to try to do the right thing, being careful about what I say and where I say it and how I say it. It is more difficult to genuinely know myself and to listen deeply and care-fully to the voice of God within. It is in this latter deep listening that we access our vocation. It is here that we find our soul-work. And, it is work, at times, to be true to one's soul.

Again, from Palmer:

The social systems in which people must survive often try to force them to live in a way untrue to who they are. If you are poor, you are

supposed to accept, with gratitude, half a loaf or less; if you are black, you are supposed to suffer racism without protest; if you are gay, you are supposed to pretend that you are not. You and I may not know, but we can at least imagine, how tempting it would be to mask one's truth in situations of this sort ? because the system threatens punishment if one does not.

But, in spite of that threat, or because of it, the people who plant the seeds of movements make a critical decision: they decide to live "divided no more." *They decide no longer to act on the outside in a way that contradicts some truth about themselves that they hold deeply on the inside.* They decide to claim authentic selfhood and act it out ? and their decisions ripple out to transform the society in which they live, serving the selfhood of millions of others. (Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, 2000, p. 31-32)

What Palmer suggests, to live "divided no more," should not be mistaken for a vocation of ease. The vocation, itself, often comes with competing and sometimes conflicting claims on our lives. In fact, is it not more often the case that what we are called to do is to live in the middle of churches where people love us, wonder about us, and hate us all at the same time? We are called not to meet the expectations of everyone else; rather we are called to find how God's truth inside of us lays claim on our selfhood in a way that provides an authentic voice to the external world. This is prophetic, in and of itself.

### **Openness to God's spirit**

How do we come to be so much at home within our soul and so much aware of God's soul within us that we can do nothing less than live and speak prophetically?

### **Vocation; Openness to God's Spirit**

Vocation is ultimately linked to our openness to God's spirit indwelling in our lives. In many ways, it is this openness that reflects our willingness to be here today. Some of us, I am certain, come here today because we know that we will find like-minded and like-spirited folks within the United Methodist tradition. We need to be together to refresh our souls, nurture our spirits, so that we

might return to the task of daily prophetic living. We are open to God's refreshing touch on our lives and our souls.

I am also certain that some are here today because they wonder what the next step is that God calls them into. Their openness is to the ongoing process of discerning their vocation in the context of community. Still others, I am certain, come with deep concerns and prayers about the agenda for the church that is embraced in this meeting. My own prayer is that all of us in this place, regardless of our perspective, will remain open to God's spirit in the other.

What remains clear is that we all come here to be cracked open in some way by the radical call of a God who is not yet finished with this church. Seeking an authentic way to bring witness to God and to this church is part of the call to openness. There are, however, a few words of caution that I would bring to this notion of opening ourselves up to the Spirit of God. First, in our boldness to claim the gospel and to be prophets, let us also stand with the humbleness of knowing that rarely do we have all the answers or know the right way for everyone. To be open is to posture ourselves in the world in such a way that we can receive, experience, and discern some of the movement of God in our individual and corporate lives. We stand with a sense of humility knowing that God speaks in many ways to many people and ours is but one.

Second, let us be open to the different gifts and different paths through which God can move. One of my deepest regrets about the TBLG community is the insistence by some that there is a "right" way to live prophetically in the world. For some, no one should live in a closet and everyone should be open with families and friends and neighbors and churches and every church should just get with the program. Oh, that the world of prophecy were so easy to discern. The reality is that not everyone is called to speak on the floor of the Conference; not everyone has the gift of patience in unfolding dialogue and conversation with people from divergent perspectives; not everyone is called to give us their closet easily without first counting the cost of such openness. If we are to honestly allow God to speak through the individual lives of human beings in community, we must deeply respect the

vocational life to which each one individually is called.

Third, we need to remain open to the unintentional prophets whose daily existence speak of a remarkable willingness to live. These prophets are the people who in their daily lives attempt to live as faithfully as possible, trying to make sense of life and attempting to live in a church that does not always feel very much like it is a place where God dwells or where they are welcome. Many of these folks are what I would call the unintentional prophet, for they do not consider their life to be particularly cutting edge. They are the people whose prophetic witness is found in the fact that they survive, and sometimes even thrive, in spite of the church's treatment of them and their families. The very nature of their daily life ? the fact that they get up in the morning and face a world and a church that does not want them ? suggests something about the prophetic nature of living faithfully in the world. The price they pay for being who they are is more than I think God intends, but it is the cost they bear for their faithfulness. Their living compels me to dare to stand here and be a voice on behalf of many others.

## **Integrity**

How do we come to be so much at home within our soul and so much aware of God's soul within us that we can do nothing less than live and speak prophetically?

## **Vocation; Openness to God's Spirit; Integrity**

The word integrity has become one of our favorite words to use when we want to talk about the wholeness or soundness of something. In fact, if you turn to the old-fashioned dictionary, you will find glimpses of a three-fold definition:

1. Integrity refers to the state or quality of being complete, undivided, or unbroken. For example, a foundation of a home that has integrity might be thought to be one that holds together.
2. Or, integrity can mean something akin to an unimpaired or unmarred state. For example, a car or a piece of machinery has integrity

when it is not compromised beyond safety and usefulness.

3. Or, integrity can be used to mean moral soundness; honesty; freedom from corrupting influence or practice. A community or church that has integrity is one that is honest and sound, free from influences or practices that compromise the very foundation of its life-giving Gospel.

I suspect that, in this room, we have many different understandings of what "integrity" is for those of us who wish to carry a prophetic voice. In many ways, integrity is related to the notion of vocation talked about earlier. To have internal integrity means to consciously and intentionally ? as much as is possible ? seek to live the "undivided life" where heart and soul and mind and spirit and body and being and doing lead us to a wholeness and a holiness that centers and guides our daily living.

Integrity's root word is also the one found in the word integration, meaning to unite so as to form one whole. There are, of course, many facets to integrity: spiritual, moral, theological, and academic, to name a few. What I am most clear about is that without an internal congruence between what we think we believe, who we say we are, and the reality of our actions, we compromise ourselves and our prophetic voice. If we say that we believe in open hearts, open minds, and open doors, then our prophetic voice ought always to be led by that spirit.

Such integrity compels us to live prophetically, not rejecting this posture when life gets cumbersome or when there is dis-ease about the proclamations of our voice. Our soul is at home when the integration of our heart and mind embodies the love of God for self, neighbors, and others.

## **Closets and Communities**

How do we come to be so much at home within our soul and so much aware of God's soul within us that we can do nothing less than live and speak prophetically?

## **Vocation; Openness to God's Spirit; Integrity; Closets and Communities**

A story: Several years ago we bought our first house. It happened to be close to the seminary where I had taken a faculty position. It was still unclear how our life together would be shaped by my place in this new institution. As we prepared to move into the house, we discovered the doors of our closets did not work properly. There were gaps between the doors and the walls; at times the doors came off the tracks; the closets weren't big enough to contain our wardrobes; we tried to shift things from one closet to another so that we had more space; the closets were useful in some minimal way, but we spent a great deal of time and energy every day trying to figure out how to make them work, not only for us but for those who came to visit. We tried to fix them ourselves; ultimately we needed the community of others to assist us ? particularly the community of Home Depot and skilled crafts-folk.

My hunch is that everyone in this room has had some similar situation ? closets contain the precious pieces of our internal worlds, parts of our internal thinking and being about which we ought to be careful and respectful. All of us ? straight, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered ? have some internal places that we keep closed off. These are the places in our lives where hurts easily damage and bruises last a very long time. These closets ? these sanctuaries ? protect us in our vulnerabilities and become the places where, in the solitude of our journey with God and with those whom we trust, we can begin to put things back together in ways that make us more holy and whole.

What I have come to believe about the closets of our lives is that they are sacred places and they contain the deepest pieces of our soul. Because they hold the power of a sacred space, they can be places of hurt and pain, where damage builds and lives internally; where fear and loss keep us penned in from all sides; where unresolved feelings or lack of self-worth or shame and pity reside and become stronger in the darkness of our inner soul.

But, because they are sacred places, they also have the potential to be sanctuaries where healing and wholeness begin to take shape and form. Such internal healing occurs when a number of things happen: when we recognize and affirm the sacredness of that internal space and the very real

fears and losses that are represented there; when we refuse to allow the fears that live in the closet to run our lives and hem in our prophetic voice; when we invite people into some of those sacred spaces so that God's presence and grace is experienced beyond our individual hopes, but is made manifest in the presence of the community of God who not only affirm, but celebrate life with us.

The reality is that we all need to examine the closets of our hearts and our lives. Such self-examination is actually very Wesleyan, of course ? the question, how is it with your soul, after all, is something not foreign to those of us who know Wesley's persistence in asking pointed questions to his groups of covenant communities. As we examine our world internally, we need communities of faithful friends, colleagues, churches, and other prophets to keep us honest and to shape and inform our growth. It is in the grace of both the closets and communities that we learn to be at home in our soul.

### **Empathic Engagement**

How do we come to be so much at home within our soul and so much aware of God's soul within us that we can do nothing less than live and speak prophetically?

### **Vocation; Openness to God's Spirit; Integrity; Closets and Communities; Empathic Engagement**

It may seem odd to end this call to the prophetic vocational life with a call to empathy. Yet, our capacity to engage empathically with those around us is precisely why we gather in this room today. We are aware of the Pathos ? the suffering and deeply intense feelings of hurt and pain that surround all of the community of faith as we wrestle with difficult issues. Regardless of whether we are bisexual, lesbian, straight, gay or transgendered, all of us are called to be partners in the journey, bearing witness to the pain of our common life and continuing to reside in the hope of God's transforming grace.

Empathic engagement with ourselves suggests that we are called to be as gentle with the broken and weary places of our souls as God is with us. When we are confused about our vocation, or when we are

less than open to the Spirit of God moving on the faces of those around us, or when our feeble attempts to live with integrity fail us, or when we allow our closets to capture us and we do not trust the communities to sustain and hold us, God calls us to be gentle with our souls. Trusting God's grace to engage our spirits is part of what it means to live prophetically in ourselves.

Yet, when we come face to face with our soul, we also know that God's prophetic voice calls us to commit ourselves to empathic engagement even with those who do not understand us or who disagree with us or who hate us. We do this not from the naïve perspective that individual engagement will end in mutual resolution about the direction the church should move; Rather, living as one body of Christ ? one church ? means that we are engaged with one another at various levels of discourse. Living prophetically means that the community must continue the dialogue on behalf of us all. At a minimum, such empathic engagement requires that we pray God's goodness and grace to be with those who are opposed to us as well as those who are supportive of us. That is, after all, what it means to be a community of faith ? a discerning body of believers who will not allow people to be lost from the table of grace because of a rigid and narrow perspective that believes one group must be right and the other must be wrong. Instead, the call of the gospel is always the call toward deeper integrity and honesty and inclusiveness.

Ultimately, to not engage one another with an empathic zeal has a deep and abiding cost to each one of us individually and to the church as a whole. Somewhere, several minutes ago in the beginning of this presentation, I noted that I am not only concerned with "individual" faithfulness; rather my concern is how our individual calls to live the prophetic life ultimately call the community into faithfulness. I am convinced that God will not rest until we as a community come to terms with what it means to live and be the church with one another and with the world.

How do we come to be so much at home within our soul and so much aware of God's soul within us that we can do nothing less than live and speak prophetically? We do so by living and listening to

the VOICE of the God within us through our vocation, our openness to God's spirit, our integrity, our closets and communities, and our empathic engagement with all the members of the body of Christ.

When my soul is weary of the engagement, I remember the words in what we know as Second Corinthians:

But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed . . . But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture ? "I believed, and so I spoke" ? we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence." (II Cor. 4:7-9; 13-14)

How is it with your soul?