Preaching Notes

Season after Epiphany 4.B.2015

February 1, 2015

Guest Author Rev. Dr. Gennifer Benjamin Brooks

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Last month, just fourteen days ago on January 15th we acknowledged the birthday of the twentieth century prophet Martin Luther King Jr. The national celebration of his legacy four days later included worship services of remembrance as well as myriad service projects by well-meaning adults, children and groups. These were appropriate events given the sacrificial work of this prophet of God. But for me the backdrop to those celebrations, the recent and continued killings of African Americans spoke even more profoundly of the continued need for a prophet to keep alive the mission and the message begun, not simply by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. but by all the prophets who have spoken in the name of God beginning with Moses. Moses’ message to the Pharaoh of his day was the same message that Dr. King brought: “Let my people go.” Throughout the ages, the prophets of God have brought a singular message. In every age, God has been saying: “Let my people live.” It is an unpopular message that is contrary to the prevailing and timeworn practices of those who have been upheld by the false prophets of every day, wherein the few have oppressed the many in the interest of their own wealth and suspect prosperity. And the messengers of the divine, the prophets of God have been subject to the particular violence of their day and killed. Did not Jesus himself lament over Jerusalem that killed the prophets?

The text gives us a clear definition of the responsibility that is placed on those who claim the prophetic role among the people of God. The prophet is God’s mouthpiece and this public, religious leader is charge to offer to the people only what comes directly from God. It is undergirded by the assurance of covenant wherein God seeks only what is good for the people of God. The prophet arises from the people, receives the word of God directly from God, and speaks in the name of God that which comes only from God. It is a definite and difficult charge that many preachers who profess to speak the “Word of God” find impossible to fulfill, some because of their fear of incurring the displeasure or even the wrath of the people, and others because of their focus on promising unrealistic wealth and unrealizable blessings while claiming the same for themselves on the backs of the people. How does the preacher whose focus is more on inciting the people to give beyond their ability in the interest of their own prosperity offer a message that calls his or her benefactors to account for the violence of body and spirit done to those who are the source of their own abundance? And how does the preacher whose lackluster witness is caused by insufficient connection to the source offer a transformative word to those in abject need of God’s grace? Where are the prophets of God to be found? And how does the well-meaning preacher take on a truly prophetic role in the name of God and for the sake of the people?

The African American church and preachers have often been given the appellation prophetic, and there have been many preachers in many traditions among African American religious bodies that have indeed been prophetic; that have spoken God’s truth at the expense of careers and even their own lives. However, the term cannot be applied across the board because even though they have arisen out of the people that they represent, many African American preachers have been caught and bought by systems and institutions that seek their own advancement at the expense of the people. Others have been seduced by the power that seems to emanate from financial gain and have sold themselves to other gods recognizing correctly that taking on a truly prophetic role can be done only at the expense of their own much-desired financial prosperity.

Likewise, the established church has long lost its prophetic voice except in a very few places as it seeks to get along with corporate power brokers who support some special causes, rather than speak out prophetically against the evils that oppress all God’s people. This text calls to us who have for too long offered a sanitized Jesus on a polished cross and reminds us that the word of God must be for the people of God a word that sharpens their witness and cuts away at the dross that keeps us silent in the face of widespread evil. The message to the preacher/prophet calls for accountability with respect to the preached and lived word among God’s people. The people of God wait with expectancy – or they should – for the message that God sends for the righteous living of their lives. And the preacher that subverts that message, even with the intention of providing ease for the hearers, stands clearly under the judgment of God who requires truth spoken not simply to power brokers, but also to all people for their empowerment as adherents to divine will.

So how does one hear and recognize God’s words and speak them with clarity and with zeal? The text does not provide a prescription for prophetic health, but it does suggest that one maintain a connection to God that includes both hearing and speaking. One would consider it normative that those who would speak God’s word also keep open the channels that allow for hearing that word. However, my experience with pastors in the field and with students, preparing for pastoral work says otherwise. A quick reading of this text might consider it appropriate mainly in settings where one is preaching to other preachers, active or in training. And that may indeed be a most appropriate venue. However, the preacher might be helped by lingering awhile within these words as a precursor to renewing his or her own covenant within which resides the task of prophecy.

One attribute of biblical preachers was the zeal or charisma with which they offered the word of God to the people of God. Certainly, modern day prophets like Dr. King, Dr. Jeremiah Wright and Dr. Gardner Taylor, recognized for their place in the prophetic tradition of the church, brought their message with intensity and with zeal. There was no doubt that in their preaching, they delivered what they believed, and that what they believed was what they considered they had heard from God. Any preacher can live up to that requirement. Every preacher should. Every preacher, called by God to be prophet to the people, is charged to hear this word, the word of God and offer it faithfully, with confidence and zealously to the people of God so that they also can receive the word of God for the righteous living of their lives.

1 Corinthians 8: 1-13

“A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” Upon reading this passage, this timeworn adage popped into my head. The question put to Paul and his response also brought to mind the many persons who have confronted me with my continued love of certain foods that these persons swear put my spiritual health in jeopardy. I love Paul’s answer: “Food will not bring us close to God.” But can it keep us from living a righteous life? In fact that is the real question within this text, or at least one question that in its context caused division in the church and required a response from their spiritual leader.

Even minimum exegesis will bring to light the issue that those in Corinth faced where meat that was sacrificed to one of the deities was later sold in the marketplace, and purchased by Christians. That little knowledge led some to think that those who bought and ate such meat were, in essence, also part of the worship of that deity. I know it seems unfathomable to our minds today, but is the issue any different when one is told that some foods are unclean (based on Old Testament health restrictions) or that worship is only correct if done in a particular style? What is necessary for bringing us close to God? Or said another way, what prevents us from living according to the commandments of Christ and doing the will of God? While that is one clear issue for this text, there is another equal challenge that must be addressed. How does one’s individual behavior impact the community? In this case it is not the actions of the pastor/preacher that is the focus. It is the action of one congregant or group of congregants over another that is central to the issue.

Broadening the scope of the issue beyond a single congregation, one may look at the issues that divide us from the perspective of a denomination and the groups that occupy opposite poles or even within the Christian Church and the denominational differences that divide the body of Christ. Within my United Methodist Church, the current argument that rages continually and threatens to divide us permanently is human sexuality. And although I may have missed it, I have yet to hear anyone talk about how one’s choice of life partner separates one from either the grace of God or the saving power of Jesus Christ. I guess since it does not, that is not an argument that should be put forward by anyone. The issue is as spurious as this argument that Paul addresses over eating food that has been previously sacrificed to idols.

And since this is Black History Month, it is appropriate that we remember the split that occurred in the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery. That persons who profess to believe in the saving love of Jesus Christ for all people would deny all people the right to live in the freedom that Christ bought for us and to support institutions that denied the humanity of any of God’s people seems unfathomable. And yet that is what the church did and continues to do by not speaking out against the injustice that is perpetrated by society. In fact, the church may well find it difficult to speak out because racism remains the unfinished item on the church’s agenda.

The preacher of this text needs to give utmost care to the way in which it is preached, lest the pointing finger is directed away from Corinth and back at the present congregation. Or perhaps it does need to point in the present direction. In every congregation, every group of persons, there are issues that surface that have the potential to divide persons. None of us are exactly the same, and none of us see and experience everything exactly the same way. That is the way that we are made thus we will differ in understanding and in belief. However, as individuals and especially as Christians, God’s grace in us helps us to be open to receiving others and their differences. That does not mean that we are to accept those things that are hurtful to our spirits simply because of those intrinsic differences. But as Christians, we are called to test everything and see if they are of God. When we hold our own actions, beliefs and foibles to the light of God we should be able to see clearly whether they are acceptable and good and right.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” The second and great commandment named by Christ is an essential guide to our conduct and to the way in which we analyze the conduct of others. The treatment of African Americans, the acceptance of LGBTQ persons, the support of persons less able that we are, and the ways in which we can accommodate persons who are different in some way that we are should be guided always by the understanding that despite the difference that we see in other, we are all equal in that we bear the image of the eternal God.

The prophetic preacher of this text will look for the congregational issues commensurate with tainted food in Corinth. Where does the division that exists find its foundation? How can it be brought forward and addressed for the health of the congregation. Many churches have split over minor issue such as the color of the carpet, the time of the service, the format of the service, and some such, while souls are dying and ministry needs are left untended. The preacher is charged with the task of helping the hearers to understand the essential of Christian witness and above all the gift of grace that God offers to all, and by that grace work together to attain unity in Christ through a life of righteousness that is empowering for all people.

Mark 1: 21-28

Demonic possession is not an area of ministry that is common to most churches and many, if not most Christians in our US culture would dismiss the idea of persons being possessed by unclean spirits and despite the movie by that name, the place of the Exorcist is not common in the hierarchy of ecclesial leadership. And yet, some persons who suffer drug addictions have said that it feels like they are possessed by a demon. There are many medical terms attached to mental illness that manifest itself in personality changes such as bipolar, schizophrenia, manic depression, and the like, that in biblical times would be called simply demonic possession or unclean spirits. The point is that the manifestation of the behaviors that cause disruption among the gathered community still exist today and the church has as many persons who suffer from these disorders as are in the society at large. So how do we address them?

As someone who has experienced such disruptive behavior by a person who confesses Christ and who in more lucid moments will proclaim Christ loudly, and who can recite more scripture than most of us who are biblically trained, I am also aware of the church’s inability and perhaps even unwillingness to provide supportive spiritual ministry to such persons. Many years ago, I was present at a midweek, midday service when a homeless, mentally challenged man walked in and began to disrupt the service. I confess freely that I joined the persons, though silently, who wanted the man removed from the sanctuary. However, I commend greatly the priest who promised the man that he would speak with him on the bible verses that the man was shouting, once the service was over. Of course being mentally incapable at that time, the man could not receive the priest’s gift of grace and had to be removed physically.

But even without the verbal expressions, I submit that there are unclean spirits that inhabit the church that are manifest in the disruptive challenges that prevent the work of Christ from being carried out. There are those who object to any new ministry that seeks to engage the least and the lost and who want to hold on to the status quo that supports their power and prestige. “What is this? A new teaching – with authority?” One example of this challenge that faces many congregations as the main line churches struggle to remain relevant is the need to invite and offer hospitality to the new persons in their community. Faces of darker hue or differing language enter the community and the idea of new ministry that does not simply cater to the feel good, superiority of the congregation – such as the food pantry or clothing closet – but actually encourage the newcomers to be a part of the church community brings conflict to the congregation and members leave in anger or disdain.

Preachers, I invite you to look beyond the specifics of the text to the message of newness and life that it represents. Jesus understood that everyone who says Lord, Lord, is not speaking of the redemptive grace of Christ. We are called to preach with the authority of the prophet, and that means that we are to offer the true words that God has placed in our hearts and on our lips. Those are words of life, and they offer the abundant life that Christ has already won for us. If your teaching is not replete with that message, it has no authority and cannot save lives. May you be filled with such teaching that emanates only from the Christ who is eternal God and who fills our mouths with good things.