

Do we really want the prophet's reward?

In this passage we heard from Matthew today, Jesus spends a good bit of time teaching about welcoming. Now Episcopalians love welcoming. We're good at welcoming. We really like saying things like "all are welcome" and "all means all", and for the most part we mean it. Under normal circumstances, we are thrilled when a new person walks through our doors, even, or maybe especially if that person has been denied welcome in some other faith community. But there's one category of people that Jesus mentions that I think gives most of us pause:, "Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward". This leaves me with a lot of questions: Do we welcome prophets? Who are the modern day prophets? Do we even want the prophet's reward?

The Hebrew Scriptures are teeming with prophets, and it seems to me that most of them don't receive rewards that I would aspire to have. You see, prophets are not actually received all that well. More often than not, They are mocked, beaten, or exiled. They come to God's people with messages of repentance and change, which we usually don't welcome. Welcoming a prophet would mean making space to listen and be receptive to the message he or she brings. It would mean admitting that even we are in need of God's re-direction. Do we really want the prophet's reward?

We love to think of our church as being progressive, as being something apart from those "other" Christians who are more judgmental, or less tolerant than we are. And don't get me wrong - we are certainly welcoming and progressive in some areas. But really, the Episcopal church, like most other churches, has historically been reactive to changes in society. Whether it's been on issues of racial equality, gender equality, or marriage equality, we don't usually lead, we let prophets sort themselves out in public, and then jump on board later to support. This is not to say that we haven't made some good choices along the way. Eventually. However, if we were to truly welcome prophets it would mean not just accepting people on the condition that they like our music, our liturgy, our programs the way they are. It means that we truly make space to listen for different voices, and that is not easy to do. Welcoming prophets means taking the time

to intentionally examine ourselves for ways that we are not living up to our call to seek and serve Christ in all persons.

I know that it's tempting to hear the messages of the prophets calling out for racial justice and to want to lash out and blame others who may vote differently, worship differently, or think differently than we do. Some of those things are no doubt true. But while making a scathing Facebook post makes us feel better in the moment, I wonder sometimes if it takes the focus off the work we need to do within ourselves. Taking a good honest look at our own shortcomings isn't pretty. None of us are exempt. I've been horrified at what I've found within myself during the process of unpeeling the layers of racist ideas that I've been taught over the years. It's painful, and made even more painful by the fact that I deeply love and respect the people in my life who taught these things. How do we begin to reconcile these things?

It is my belief that undoing ideas taught by our beloved ancestors that we now recognize are not consistent with the Gospel message actually honors them more than clinging to harmful stereotypes and lost causes. It is not erasing history to acknowledge that something was wrong, and to repent for that. In his sermon last week, Fr. Terry called us all to begin with prayer, but not to leave it at that. He reminded us that we are also called to act on our prayers, and it is in self-examination that this lasting work of change begins. Theologian and Dean of the Vanderbilt Divinity school Emilie Townes calls this "redoing our first works", or doing our iceberg work. Working on thoughts and ideas that linger below the surface, ingrained by centuries of subtle (or not so subtle) reinforcement.

Now, the prophet's job is to bring and proclaim the message. The people are the ones who then have to do the iceberg work. It's not necessarily the prophet's job to help us do the difficult work of self-examination and repentance. We want so desperately for someone to just tell us what to do to fix our world's problems. But let's face it. Prophets are notoriously bad at pastoral care. That's not their job to take care of us. Jeremiah sounds kind of nice in the passage we heard from the Old Testament today, but if you look at the whole chapter this is from, it's pretty clear that he's being sarcastic. He's

confronting a false prophet who tells the King and the people what they want to hear -- that everything is going to be just fine. The people who have been taken into captivity in Babylon are going to return with all the possessions that were stolen from the temple, and everything is going to go back to normal in a couple of years. Israel will be great again! They can go ahead and start praising God for their deliverance.

But then Jeremiah breaks in in the passage we heard today and says “that all sounds lovely. I hope that works out for you.” But unfortunately, the true message from God is that you don’t get to move on to the happy ending before the people have done their time in Babylon for the full seventy years and have learned how to depend on God. That doesn’t sound like a message the people would welcome. That sounds like the people still have some hard work to do. And it probably doesn’t feel fair to that new generation of Israelites born in Babylon that they have to pay for the sins of their ancestors. But sin and grievous injustices don’t go away overnight. We sometimes have to do work that undoes mistakes of the past, even if it doesn’t feel fair, even if you’re feeling tired of dealing with it, even if the prophet doesn’t tell you how.

What matters is that Jeremiah is telling the truth. We don’t get to move on to praise and thanksgiving until we’ve learned how to fully lament and repent. Without lament and repentance for where we have gone astray, our praise is empty. It is false optimism and promises of hope without meaningful change. It is our lament that sanctifies our praise.

Thankfully, we have a really good resource to help us do the work of self-examination that we use every Sunday, and much more often if you pray the Daily Office. It’s a prayerbook that traces the journey of a people who had to learn the hard way not to rely on false promises of earthly rulers, but to acknowledge that God is the true king. I’m speaking of the Psalter, and today’s Psalm is one of the most surprising of them all. Do you know the festal shout? Doesn’t that sound like fun? We go from a festal shout to acknowledging that “Truly the Lord is our ruler”. Break out the party poppers. That seems to wrap this psalm up nicely. Except.

Except that Psalm 89 goes on for much much longer, ending on the LOWEST note of the entire psalter. If you said Evening Prayer this past Monday you heard the rest of this Psalm. When you read the second part of Psalm 89 you'll find that the psalmist goes to bring some ugly things before God while wrestling with why the people are struggling so much when God promised them good things. The psalmist outright accuses God of breaking the covenant God extended to David, of exalting the psalmist's foes and of covering the psalmist with shame. How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted; how I bear in my bosom the insults of the people.

Yes, God can take our darkest thoughts and feelings. You don't have to be afraid to bring the ugly parts of yourself to God. Your questions, your railings, your tears and hurt, even your accusations and your anger at God for not fixing everything for us. God can take it, and knows that this is part of the process of moving towards repentance. God wants all of you. When we acknowledge God as our ruler over any governor, president, or earthly rewards, we take a step towards being people who are ready to receive the prophet's reward with a great festal shout!

The prophets are begging us to welcome them and to lament with them, to repent and ultimately to praise God with them. This pure praise in the knowledge of true repentance is a part of the prophet's reward. The psalms show us a template for how to begin. You are called to the individual work of self-examination and repentance, but you do not have to do the work alone. You have the words of the Bible full of stories of people who have made terrible mistakes and have found their way back to God through the work of repentance. You have a great cloud of witnesses encouraging you, praying for you, and walking with you. You have Jesus urging you on to receive the prophet's reward by offering true welcome to the prophets' message. And don't forget that you have a supportive clergy team and church family to lean on. Talk. Confess. Lament. Repent. And, Praise. We will face this work together so that someday, we will be a people who can truly say we have welcomed all in Jesus' name.