

“Following Christ the Prophet”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
3-4-18

Based upon Jer. 7:1-11; Mark 11:15-19 (Lenten Series Part I)

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not agree on all of the details about Jesus’ life, or how best to tell his story. Matthew favored emphasizing Jesus’ sermons; Mark, his miraculous healings, Luke, his parables, and John, his transforming encounters with certain key individuals. But they all recognized that Jesus was more than just a man, he was the Messiah, and that in his role of Messiah, he filled multiple other spiritual roles for the people as well. John Calvin identified three of those roles, which he called the three “offices” of Christ as “prophet, priest, and king.” But there are many others. So, for the rest of Lent, I will be inviting us to consider some of these roles. What does it teach us about Christ and God that people understood Jesus in these ways? Even more importantly, how should the fact that Jesus was understood in these ways affect how we follow and serve Christ in the world? The first role we’ll consider, thanks to today’s Gospel lesson, is the role of Christ as prophet.

One of the things that all four canonical gospels agree upon is that at some point in his ministry, Jesus went up to the Temple in Jerusalem and caused a scene shouting, swinging a whip, tipping over one of the money changer’s tables, and insulting the members of the establishment there. *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke* say that Jesus’ act of protest and outrage was one of the last things he did before he was arrested and put on trial. They suggest that the reason Jesus was arrested was because of his behavior in the Temple, which was the last straw for the Jewish authorities who already resented Jesus’ growing power and influence. *John*, in contrast, records that Jesus’ Temple attack, which scholars usually refer to as “the cleansing of the Temple” even though Jesus mostly made a mess, was not one of his last acts, but rather one of his first. *John* reports that in the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus made a crazy amount of wine for a wedding in Cana, rested for a few days in Capernaum, and then went to the Temple to stir things up and predict his resurrection. So instead of being justification for Jesus’ arrest, in *the Gospel of John*, Jesus’ protest in the Temple, combined with wine-making miracle in Cana, serve to define the kind of ministry that Jesus will do. “Here’s my business card,” he was effectively saying. “I am in the business of giving abundant life, and to do that I will be picking up the mantle of the great prophets of old, condemning the corruption which stands in the way of that life.”

Regardless of whether Jesus cleansed the Temple first or last in his ministry, it is clear from all four gospels that when he did, Jesus intended his actions to be understood as a prophetic proclamation because he quoted the prophets to explain them. Again, there is a small disagreement among the gospel writers about which prophets Jesus quoted. The three synoptic gospels record Jesus combining verses from *Isaiah* and *Jeremiah*: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations. But you have made it a den of robbers!” In *John*, Jesus quotes *Zechariah* instead of *Jeremiah*, accusing the people of turning the Temple “into a marketplace.” (See *Zech.* 14:21). But either way the point is that Jesus, like all the great prophets who had served God before him, intended with his actions to offer a rebuke of the powers-that-be for what he believed was behavior contrary to the will of God.

This was the role of the Old Testament prophets. People today tend to think of prophets as fortune tellers who predicted the future. But although they did speak about the future occasionally, the primary job of the prophets was to speak to their present, and specifically to God's displeasure with how humanity was behaving in their present. God called Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other great prophets to take on the royal establishment, which had long since abandoned the covenant God entered into with Moses and the escaped Hebrew slaves. They were called to expose their corruption, to challenge the kings' and their subjects' unfaithfulness, and to call everyone to return to God's better way.

Jesus was doing just this when he tipped over the tables of the money changers. He wasn't protesting the royal establishment. But he was protesting what he saw as a violation of God's will by either the religious establishment, the people, or both. Unfortunately, exactly what that violation was is not 100% clear. As I explained to the children, the money changers were in the Temple to help Jews worship God according to the Law. They were exchanging the people's Roman and other foreign currency, which was printed with idolatrous pictures of the emperor or pagan gods, with Jewish Temple-approved currency. They were also selling animals to be sacrificed so that pilgrims who had come from far away would not have to bring their own animals to comply with the sacrificial laws. So yes, the part of the Court of the Gentiles where these transactions were taking place looked like a market place. It was a marketplace. But they were not doing this in the Holy of Holies, so why Jesus thought what they were doing was wrong isn't immediately obvious.

All we really have to go on to interpret Jesus' actions is his quotation from *Jeremiah* equating the money changers' market with "a den of robbers." This has led some scholars to conclude that the money changers must have been crooks who were short-changing folks for profit. There is some anecdotal evidence from that time that the money changers were taking advantage of the poor by insisting that any extra money the pilgrims had above and beyond the cost of the sacrificial animal and the Temple tax had to be donated to the Temple. In other words, they were refusing to make change. For the rich, the half a shekel Temple tax and the cost of an animal were no big deal. But for the poor, who needed to save all year to be able to afford their turtle doves and tax, having to give even a nickel or dime-equivalent more than was necessary to the Temple was an extreme hardship. So, it may be that when Jesus accused the money changers of turning the Temple into a den of robbers, he was accusing them of using the Law to exploit the poor. The system was supposed to allow the faithful to connect with God but was really benefitting the rich and the powerful who ran the Temple and didn't need the money, at the expense of the poor. We know that economic justice was very important to Jesus from other texts, and from the fact that the Old Testament prophets were always concerned with the challenges of the poor.

But if we go back to Jeremiah's sermon, which Jesus quoted, I think there was even more at stake for Jesus than financial abuse of the poor. As we heard in today's lesson, Jeremiah accused the people in his day of coming to the Temple, saying the liturgy: "This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord," and thinking they were spiritually safe as a result. Then they would leave the Temple and happily go about their way violating all

the Commandments. “You steal, murder, swear falsely, go after other gods, oppress the widow, orphan, and alien as if through your faith or worship you have just purchased the privilege of disobeying God when you please,” Jeremiah said. “God does not want your empty flattery, and worship is not about paying God for a “get-out-of-jail-free card. God wants you to live God’s way seven days a week. God expects you to build a society which is grounded in God’s economy and grace. Your praise and sacrifices are meaningless if they do not lead you to create a faithful society.” In other words, Jeremiah accused the people of robbing God by being spiritual hypocrites.

I think Jesus was making a similar charge to the powers-that-be in his day. He was taking a stand against the establishment, which regardless of whether it was cheating people during the exchanges or not, was using the Law to preserve its power and wealth rather than to connect people more closely with God. Jesus was protesting the kind of spiritual hypocrisy, which makes a big deal about the mechanics of worship but does little or nothing to further the ways of the kingdom in the world. For Jesus, the Temple was never about escape or going through certain motions to achieve personal safety. It was about devoting oneself to a God who demands economic, political, social, and spiritual righteousness and justice. The Temple authorities were selling God’s grace without serving it. They were making themselves comfortable without addressing the misery in the world. That was unacceptable to Jesus.

Today however, it is Jesus’ counter-cultural prophetic approach to the Gospel which is more often seen as unacceptable to many Christians, who like comfort and much of the surrounding culture. So, it is quite common for congregants across denominations to get their backs up if talk in church has economic or political implications or criticizes the surrounding culture. Many want Church to be a shelter from the storms of life, not a training place for table flipping. “I want to come and feel loved and forgiven.” “Church should make me feel happy, not uncomfortable,” people tell their pastors, and pastors are often no more comfortable with Jesus’ prophetic outlook on life than their congregants. Reinhold Niebuhr, the great Christian ethicist used to say that he could tell how long a pastor had been with and loved his congregation by how prophetic his sermons were. The more a pastor knew and loved his congregation, the gentler and more comforting his sermons became. I don’t think that is true in all cases. I hope not in mine because I do not see prophetic preaching and congregational love as mutually exclusive. But it is true that pastors don’t like to ruffle feathers any more than congregants like to be ruffled. We all want safety. Safety from human judgment, safety from eternal judgment, safety from the chaos and judgments of the world.

The call of the Old Testament prophets, and the call of Christ, however, was always a call to transform humanity, church, and society, not to hide from or excuse their flaws. Jesus made it clear that he considered it to be spiritual hypocrisy to say that you love God but not care for the poor, the widowed, and the orphaned. It is hypocrisy to sing “Seek ye the Kingdom first” in here and not fight for the kingdom out there. If we are to follow Jesus, therefore, it falls to us to don the prophet’s mantle as well. We must not remain silent when the powers-that-be, be they in or outside the Church, oppress, or perpetuate and excuse injustice. We must not ally ourselves with the status quo or the establishment, more than we do with God.



Although this makes our calling as Christ's disciples exciting and relevant, it does not make it comfortable. As Ted Loder put it, "Engagement takes courage, which is half of what faith is. It involves taking risks."¹ But consider the alternative. Do we really want to get comfortable with the ways of the world right now? I don't know if any of you saw this article or picture a few days ago. This church in Pennsylvania invited its congregation to bring in their automatic weapons to be blessed.

[Slide shown.]² Seriously. This is not fake news or a staged event. Now admittedly, this was a Church devoted to Sean Yun Moon, not to Jesus Christ, but it still calls itself a church. And the press about them is still that "people of faith" were devoted to using automatic weapons to preserve the peace of the kingdom of God.³ What does the Christian Church have to say to such corruptions of the Gospel? What does it have to say to the people who are now attacking the teenagers who survived Parkland's slaughter because they are daring to challenge the establishment's idolatrous and dangerous views on guns? What do we have to say to a system which boasts of protecting our country by splitting up children from their parents just because they were recent immigrants, not historic ones, or which treats people born with a lot of melanin in their skin as threats or less than human, and those with little as gods?

There is so much that is wrong with our world today, so much that is light year's worse than what the money changers were doing. Even more depressingly, much of it is being done by people who claim to worship Christ. If the Church does not speak out against the wrongs, then we are complicit in the corruption, complicit in the idolatry, the murder, the theft, and all the other violations of the Commandments. If the Church does not speak out, there will be no real safety for God's children, in or outside its walls. But when we embrace our calling to be prophets as Christ was a prophet, we not only practice spiritual integrity instead of hypocrisy; in return for short term discomfort we experience, we gain the real prospect of longer-term peace. We contribute to building up the kingdom of God on earth instead of reinforcing the prestige and power of the forces of darkness.

The task isn't easy. But by the grace of God we all are qualified to do it. We can rest assured of this because the prophets of old were not theology experts or Scripture scholars. They had no special credentials beyond the fact that their love for God and God's way was greater than anything else in this life. They didn't have armies or constituencies supporting them, they just had themselves. Yet their individual voices rang out in such a powerful way that we still cannot forget them. God gave them the courage they needed, and God will do the same for us. Imagine if all Christians were as committed to Christ's way as the prophets were to God's. Imagine if we took as seriously God's desire that we clean out the corruption, as we do God's

¹ Loder, Ted, *The Haunt of Grace: Responses to the Mystery of God's Presence*, (Philadelphia: Innisfree Press, Inc. 2002), 142.

² See e.g. "Hundreds gather at church for blessing ceremony featuring AR-15s", CBSN, posted Feb. 28, 2018, retrieved March 1, 2018 from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hundreds-of-worshippers-gather-at-church-for-blessing-ceremony-featuring-AR-15s>

³ Ibid.

promise for abundant life. The Church universal would be healthier and better respected, and the world would be a different place.

Presbyterians are not naturally table-flipping kinds of people. We like decency and order. But we can be silence breakers more than we currently are, and according to Walter Brueggemann, it is the job of prophets “to be silence breakers who insist that the old patterns of power must be disrupted and reconfigured.”⁴ According to Christ the prophet, this job is part of discipleship. So, do not fear the discomfort of being counter-cultural. Do not use your faith simply to escape. Use it to inspire you and others to engage and speak out, until the comfort we all rest in is the comfort and integrity of the kingdom of God. Amen.

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter, Interrupting Silence: God’s Command to Speak Out (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 2-3.