

Inconvenient Truths
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Luke 4:14-30
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There is always more than one way to say things.

And always more than one way to hear what is said.

I state the obvious.

But I will give an example:

In today's scripture, Jesus unrolls what was most certainly a very, very long scroll, and reads from Holy Scripture, from the prophet Isaiah.

The New Revised Standard translation reads like this:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

The New Jerusalem Bible translation translates this same passage this way:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted.”

Poor. Afflicted.

Why such different words chosen? One reason might be that when we use the word “poor,” the image that is conjured up is those who suffer for lack of basic spirit or material necessities. But if we read Luke's gospel closer, we hear that the poor are the marginalized, and marginalization is an expanse of factors including, but not limited to poverty. There are many ways a person could be excluded and marginalized: gender, age, economic destitution, physical disability and or illness, familial connections, or lack thereof, religious impurity. Those afflicted, in other words.

This week, I especially liked the New Jerusalem version.

I like it because it feels like it includes me.

Because last week, I felt afflicted.

And the affliction, thank God, has not gone away.

Not afflicted in the way that Luke means, not marginalized afflicted, but I felt affected, distressed, troubled, challenged, uncomfortable. You know, afflicted. And I am glad to hear today's reading, because the anointed one companions the afflicted ones, too.

Last Sunday many of us gathered at 9 a.m. to hear Sister Helen Prejean, a prophet of our time. She stood right up here and pointed to the cross and reminded us that there could have been nothing more shameful or terrifying for the followers of Jesus than to know that the Messiah, the anointed, the promised savior of Israel, was executed in the most humiliating of ways, on a cross, with the worst of the worst.

So embarrassed were the early Christians, Sister Helen told us, that for the first four hundred years Christians stayed as far away from the symbol of the cross as possible. Fish, sheep, other symbols of the Jesus story were found in the catacombs, but never the cross.

We forget, don't we, when Christianity feels cozy, the scandal and violence that is there too in our tradition. And it might be easy to ignore the demands of that cross, wouldn't it, if it weren't for the prophets calling us back, calling us to central truths, inconvenient truths though they may be.

Some think that the controversy of Jesus' life, which ultimately led to his death, was because he was trying to start a new thing - that it was about the church versus the synagogue, the old versus the new. Not true, the prophets remind us. Jesus simply, effectively held up the mirror of the tradition before its followers, saying: This is who we are, this is who we can be, this is the work to which God calls us: the work of justice, the work of redemption, the work of love.

So last week we gathered to hear another prophet Sister Helen Prejean. Some of us had seen the movie "Dead Man Walking," some of us had read the book or heard about her tireless work for human rights and for the end of the death penalty.

And she started her words to us by pointing to the cross.

And then she spoke of love.

She pointed to our banner, it is right there still: God insists that we love one another . . . we hear those words, behold that cross, and the prophet's clarity, the prophet's passion, the prophet's challenge, unsettles me, stops, reminds me why I am a Christian in the first place. For the words and witness of the prophets wake something up in me and though I'm not sure I like it, I know it feels like God.

A God that asks, requires, challenges, makes us defensive. For I am certain there is nothing aloof or ambivalent about God's love. God's is a vital, pressing, insistent love, and the prophet's job is to take us to the edge of the imperative, isn't it? And remind us that we can't speak of love without acting for justice. That the life of love is not ethereal and sweet, but motion, journey, surprise, difficult, rocky, a cliffhanger, you might say.

For when we speak of love apart from justice, we can make excuses and justify the many ways we are implicated in what is terribly wrong in the world. We can love what is close to us, and while there are challenges and struggles, we can call it a good day's work and feel like we are done. We can settle in, orbit in a world like the goldfish in the bowl of culture that Sister Helen spoke of last week - we swim around and around and don't even realize there are other universes to encounter. The fishbowl feels like plenty, doesn't it, and who doesn't want to feel some ease in life, to go with the flow.

"I watch what I do to see what I really believe." That's how Sister Helen put it when asked by National Public Radio to synthesize her personal credo for their program "This I believe."

"I watch what I do to see what I really believe."

And then she went on.

"Belief and faith are not just words. It's one thing for me to say I'm a Christian, but I have to embody what it means. I have to live it.

"'Love your neighbor as yourself,' Jesus said, and as a beginner nun I tried earnestly to love my neighbor — the children I taught, their parents, my fellow teachers, my fellow nuns. But for a long time the circle of my loving care was small and, for the most part, included only white, middle-class people like me. But one day I woke up to Jesus' deeper challenge to love the outcast, the criminal, the underdog. So I packed my stuff and moved into a noisy, violent housing project in an African-American neighborhood in New Orleans.

"I saw the suffering and I let myself feel it: the sound of gunshots in the night, mothers calling out for their

children. I saw the injustice and was compelled to do something about it. I changed from being a nun who only prayed for the suffering world to a nun with my sleeves rolled up, living my prayer. Working in that community in New Orleans soon led me to Louisiana's death row.

So I keep watching what I do to see what I actually believe.”

One of the young people, having heard this provocative statement before meeting Sister Helen, said she couldn't get the thought out of her mind as she walked through her day, what do I make of what I believe by what I see myself doing?

I would say she should know she was being poked by a prophet, whose job is to make us restless, to wake us up at 3 a.m., not lull us to sleep.

The people in the synagogue that day apparently were sitting down throughout Jesus' words because when they were filled with rage, as the story goes, Luke tells us that they “got up.” Prophetic language has that effect, doesn't it, to get us up and off our behinds and make us move to the edge. And in the case of those with Jesus that day, moved them to want to throw the prophet off the cliff. I'm certainly glad we didn't have a similar reaction to Sister Helen last week, but then I wonder what part of the message of the prophets do we want to discard, disregard?

Jesus was with his hometown folks, and his words were “gracious,” to the ears of the congregation until he picked up mirror and reflected it on them. Jesus held up the mirror of the tradition, and the people were filled with rage and fear, so much so that it moved them to violence.

There are other pictures in my mind of such rage and fear, such that would run the prophet off the cliff.

The rage and fear in the faces of white parents who screamed and spit in the faces of black school children who were newly integrating public schools.

The rage and fear of the words of those who command sister and brother immigrants to “go back where they belong” and prompt increasingly militaristic defense of borders that drive the poor to ever more life threatening extremes to cross over those borders.

I see it in the rage and fear which prompts ballot measure after ballot measure, law after law, crafted and signed off on to expose, criminalize, and otherwise alienate our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sisters and brothers.

And into this rage and fear, too, whether it our own or of another, we are invited to follow the prophets . . .

It is the cost of discipleship of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke that led him to the concentration camp, and Sister Helen to death row, and Martin Luther King Jr. to challenge our economic and military systems costing his own death. That led Dorothy Day to give up all privilege - that led Millard Fuller to give up all of his wealth to begin Habitat for Humanity, and Cesar Chavez to face angry crowds, endure violence, all the while with his gaze set on the faces of the suffering, which led Jesus to the humiliation of the cross.

Last Sunday night Sister Helen met with youth and young adults for an evening of conversation about her work, the Christian life, vocation. One of the group asked her, “What keeps you going, doing such hard work, confronting such ugliness in the world?”

And she replied, “It is such a privilege and joy for me to discover the humanity in those that society has deemed too worthless, too despised, beyond hope, so much so that they are to be destroyed.” And to hear her speak with such clarity and passion, it wasn't hard to believe that hers is a joy-filled life.

Sister Helen told the story about how one day she was asked to write to a man on death row, and she never could have known where this request would ultimately take her. Accompanying him in the final moments of his tragic life, she told how after his execution, she came out of the death chamber, alone and bewildered, devastated by what she had seen, sick to her stomach. It was the middle of the night, but she was awake in a most profound way. Because she realized, in that flash of wakefulness, that she was a witness to a terror that few in our society will ever see. She had witnessed a secret ritual of violence, and as a follower of Jesus she could not keep silent. She told the young people on Sunday evening that that's how it goes, on the journey of faith and justice. The way isn't clear, but it keeps moving when you follow the burning passion that God gifts you. She could never have known, that night of epiphany, that her witness would lead her to write a bestselling book and into the rage and grief of victim's families. It would lead her to become an international advocate for human rights. It would lead her to help make a movie that would be seen by 1.3 billion people, and in which she would be played by Susan Sarandon.

All she knew that terrifying, crystallizing night was that she was a witness, and Jesus would not let her sit down until she had told the story.

Have there been moments like that in your life, when God required something of you, bigger than the life you thought you were to live? When you were filled with restlessness, and passion, the desire to take a risk for love, for the sake of justice?

For many of us, it is the passion and purpose of the demands of the Christian life that draws us to follow Jesus in the first place. Realizing that we are not born to the world to pass our time in comfort, avoiding hard stuff, collecting other stuff, resting easy with our retirement plan well in place, or fretting about the retirement plan that isn't well in place.

Our ears are both ready and fearful of the prophet voice, aren't they? It is the joy of finding humanity in the despised, Sister Helen said, that keeps her going. There is such surprising, abiding joy there.

It is the paradox of the Christian life, isn't it? That the lost are really the found ones
That in death there is life. In giving up all the truest riches are received, that to be uncomfortable is where true peace begins . . . And to find such freedom one must pick up the cross, and start moving.

What do you care about so deeply that it sets you free? So much so that your own life fades from view and the Life that Really is Life fixes your gaze.

Is it the bank account, the diplomas on the wall, the comfortable home? I'm guessing not.

I'm guessing that if you or I are pressed to say what this one life is to us, it wouldn't be what the world sells us, but how we are moved by the world, in directions that surprise and terrify, and even delight.

That's why it makes us so wonderfully uncomfortable to encounter the prophets. If we aren't, I'm not sure we are really paying attention. The prophets call us back, hold up the mirror, and leave us with more questions than answers. And move us along, not distracted, but attracted to the One who was, and is, and always will be.

You know, Jesus never stopped moving. In fact, in Luke's gospel, "on the way" is the metaphor for the Christian life. And that day, in the synagogue, he unrolled that long, long, long scroll in front of the congregation, his hometown people. And he read the words of the prophet Isaiah, such beautiful words, words of justice, inclusion, a grand dream for creation,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me,

To bring good news to the poor,
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recover of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of Lord's favor."

And then he said, "This text is being fulfilled today in your hearing."

What would it look like, feel like, taste like, smell like for it to be true - that the prophet's good news would be fulfilled this day, in our midst? Are we in the places that we would notice the dream fulfilled, on the edges, in the shadows, with the poor, the afflicted, the captive, the lost, and the forsaken? Might we be moved to compassion, and the transformation of suffering? Might it move us to walk with those who we fear?

Jesus embodies a way for us. Jesus came to afflict the settled, to bring courage to the fearful, to make discontent the comfortable.

I love the sense of mystery that ends today's story:

"All in the synagogue were filled with rage" the story goes, they got up, drove him out of town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built. A cliff, I'd say, the edge, his message moved them to the edge. They went too so they could hurl him off the cliff. But Jesus, he kept moving somehow. He detached himself from the wild crowd.

Somehow, he passed through the midst of them and went on his way, as if, as if he knew already, something about resurrection.