

Modern-Day Prophets: Tutu, Wallis, and Sewell

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Today concludes the series of sermons that I have given over the past few months on the prophetic tradition. We began by looking at the origins of the tradition as found in the Hebrew scriptures, or Old Testament. We then continued by looking at some prophetic voices from the distant and not-so-distant past who carried the tradition forward through the centuries. And more recently we've been considering some prophets of our own times: people who have called on both the faithful and the powers that be to remain true to the positive ideals and values of love, compassion, and justice.

We wrap up those explorations today with an assortment of three individuals of varied background and faith, whose voices and actions are still very much with us in today's world. Women and men who continue, in the words of the stated Sources of our Living Tradition, to "challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love." May we see them not just as icons to be adulated, but as exemplars to be emulated.

We begin today with Desmond Tutu, the South African cleric and activist. Tutu is a man of many accomplishments. He was elected and ordained the first black Archbishop in the Anglican Church of Southern Africa. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984, the Albert Schweitzer Prize for Humanitarianism, and the Gandhi Peace Prize in 2005. He chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which has been the model for similar efforts around the world, and he has been a prolific speaker and writer.

Particularly notable has been how Tutu has used his high profile to campaign for the oppressed, to defend human rights, and to fight AIDS, poverty, and racism. Of course, one of the major struggles of Tutu's prophetic career was that against South African Apartheid. As the popular uprising against apartheid took shape in the Soweto Riots of 1976, Tutu supported an economic boycott of his country, opposing the "constructive engagement" policy of the American Reagan administration, which advocated friendly persuasion.

The strategy of disinvestment was a difficult one, as it actually hit the poor the hardest, throwing many blacks out of work. But keeping their eyes on the prize, long-term change for the better, Tutu and others persisted and finally succeeded. As the value of the Rand plunged, pressuring the government toward reform, Tutu pressed the advantage and organized

peaceful marches which brought 30,000 people onto the streets of Cape Town. Within months, future president Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, and apartheid was beginning to crumble.

Perhaps as important as his role in the struggle against apartheid was the role Tutu played after its abolition, in leading the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This court-like body was assembled for the purpose of hearing testimony of violence and atrocities from both sides, accepting confessions of wrong-doing, and in some cases granting amnesty from prosecution. The idea was not to simply replace one power structure with another, but to dig deeper to understand what had gone on and to find resolution and reconciliation of differences to the extent possible.

While not perfect, the truth and reconciliation process has been seen by many as a crucial component of the transition to full and free democracy in South Africa. In the words of Nelson Mandela at a celebration of Tutu's retirement in 1996: "His joy in our diversity and his spirit of forgiveness are as much part of his immeasurable contribution to our nation as his passion for justice and his solidarity with the poor."

Tutu may have retired as Archbishop, but he has not retired from his role as prophetic voice. He continues to work as a global activist on issues pertaining to democracy, freedom, and human rights. And in the spirit of the prophetic tradition, Tutu is an equal-opportunity critic, taking aim occasionally at the ANC-led government, condemning its corruption, its ineffectiveness in dealing with poverty, and recent outbreaks of xenophobic violence in townships across South Africa. His priority is not to support a particular party or regime, but to continue to call all parties back to a focus on the core values that have always been his guide.

I'd like to finish my treatment of Desmond Tutu by just highlighting a couple of points from his Nobel Lecture from this morning's reading that help to place him within the framework of the prophetic tradition. First is the element of warning, of pointing out the consequences of moral failure. He tells us that unless we carry forward the work of providing freedom, justice, and human rights to all, "then we are on the road inexorably to self-destruction."

And the other point is finding the universal in the particular. This is that familiar idea of thinking globally and acting locally. As Tutu said, "I have spoken extensively about South Africa, first because it is the land I know best, but because it is also a microcosm of the world and an example of what is to be found in other lands . . . – when there is injustice, invariably peace becomes a casualty." As such, the prophet Desmond Tutu speaks to us all.

Our next modern-day prophet is the Rev. Jim Wallis, who is an evangelical Christian writer and political activist. He is particularly known as founder and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, and head of the Christian Sojourners community based in Washington, DC. We religious liberals sometimes have difficulty making distinctions between “evangelical” and “religious right”. Reading and listening to Jim Wallis can be very helpful in making those distinctions. Wallis is a self-avowed evangelical Christian, but he is definitely *not* a part of the Religious Right. In fact, a couple of years ago, he wrote in *Time* magazine about the post-Religious Right era, and about the fact that evangelicals are “deserting the Religious Right in droves.”

What distinguishes Wallis’s message more than anything is its focus on issues like justice, poverty, environmentalism, and war and peace, as opposed to the so-called “moral” issues that sometimes seem to consume the religious right. At the time of the 2004 presidential election, he said “Jesus didn’t speak at all about homosexuality. There are about 12 verses in the Bible that touch on that question . . . [t]here are thousands of verses on poverty. I don’t hear a lot of that conversation.”

And so Wallis’s aim, through his books and his magazine and his activism, is to elevate the national conversation on social justice. The stated mission of *Sojourners* magazine is “to articulate the biblical call to social justice, inspiring hope and building a movement to transform individuals, communities, the church, and the world.”

In the spirit of the prophetic tradition, Wallis speaks both to the faithful, and to the powers that be. And a large part of his message to the faithful is the importance of *their* speaking to power, of calling our leaders to account, holding their feet to the fire, and insisting on good solid moral leadership in the quest for social justice.

One of Wallis’s strengths in his approach to the quest for justice is his transcendence of political boundaries and labels. It was he who introduced during the 2004 campaign the bumper-sticker slogan: “God is not a Republican – or a Democrat.” Wallis is also willing to cross religious boundaries, as illustrated by his convening of Call to Renewal, an interfaith effort to end poverty.

The subtitle of *Sojourners* magazine is “Faith, Politics, and Culture,” and its primary aim is to facilitate healthy conversation and dialogue between and among those realms. That is a prophetic mission: bringing faith to bear on the relevant social issues of the time. This approach is embodied particularly well in the most recent issue of the magazine, with its featured

section, “Dear President Obama: Memos to the new president.” The memos come from over twenty political, cultural, and religious leaders, including the likes of Marian Wright Edelman, Van Jones (another of our modern-day prophets), Elizabeth Edwards, Bono, Eboo Patel, and of course Jim Wallis himself.

In Wallis’s piece, he calls for the establishment of a “two-way street” between the new administration and the religious community. And speaking both to Obama and to us as people of faith, he writes:

The religious community must do two more things. First, we can bring people together on the great moral issues of our time from across political dividing lines, because we have a “ministry of reconciliation.” Our communities are diverse politically and always will be. It is likely that the faith community is better able to bring people together on those big questions than any other sector of society. . .

Second, there will be times when our prophetic vocation will require us to challenge your administration. That is always the hardest thing for political leaders, especially presidents, to accept or even listen to. But I think you are capable of taking criticism and even know that you need that sort of accountability. The voice of religious conscience may be one of the most important for presidents to listen to. It’s really a deeper way to offer our support and to help make you a better leader, by being faithful to your own moral compass.

May we, as people of faith and conscience, take up the challenge to be a part of the great national conversation, and to keep open that “two-way street.”

The modern-day prophets that I’ve discussed so far have come from a number of backgrounds some religious, and some secular. But none has come from our own liberal tradition of Unitarian Universalism. Until now. My final exemplar of the prophetic tradition is Unitarian Universalist minister, the Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell.

Sewell is the Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon, one of the largest congregations in our association. She is known as a passionate speaker, much in demand in the Portland area, and

she has given speeches, workshops, readings, scholarly papers, and sermons all over the United States.

Sewell has a strong commitment to social justice work. Her own efforts have focused largely on economic inequity, including issues of race and class, and women's issues. Her congregation works on a wide range of justice issues under the leadership of a dedicated Minister of Social Justice.

As Senior Minister, Marilyn Sewell is responsible for overseeing all aspects of her congregation's ministries. Besides acting as prophet, she must also be pastor, preacher, teacher, and administrator. And so, the main way she carries out her prophetic role is through providing the inspiration and encouragement to her flock to be a loud, strong voice in the larger world beyond their own walls. Her own voice does cross that barrier, through such avenues as community involvement and the airing of her sermons on public access TV.

Sewell also writes a widely-read blog. In an article on the bailout of the big three auto makers, she points out that "The problem with G.M. is a values problem, not a business mistake." In another, on the rift in the Episcopal church over gay clergy, she writes:

Where is the church's prophetic voice? The church should be the first to speak out for the disenfranchised. . . not the institution to keep people out, but the one to broaden the circle and invite people in. . . with love as the standard and goal, systemic discrimination has no place in Christian churches and institutions.

As I've said before, and as I've described in the context of the early Old Testament prophets, prophetic critique is not only directed outward toward "the other," whether that be governments or other institutions. It also comes sometimes in the form of self-reflection and criticism. One example may be found in Marilyn Sewell's sermon, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Unitarian Universalism," found in her book of sermons, *Wanting Wholeness, Being Broken*.

And so, before we call it a morning, I'd like to share with you a summary of what Marilyn Sewell has to say to us as Unitarian Universalists, in an attempt to call us back to our best selves.

First, she asserts that the traditional seven deadly sins (lust, gluttony, pride, envy, anger, avarice, and sloth) aren't really suitable for Unitarian Universalists. Not that we don't have them, but rather that they fall further down the list than some others that we should be aware of. The one exception she makes is for pride, which is, she says, "the deadliest of all the

deadly sins. It is the mother of all sin and the one unforgivable sin.” And, she goes on, “I hate to say this – but we’ve got it in spades.” And it seems that our penchant for pridefulness is a part of our Unitarian inheritance, as illustrated by Thomas Starr King’s famous quote describing the difference between the two sides of our heritage: “The Universalists believe that God is too good to condemn them to hell; the Unitarians believe that they are too good for God to condemn to hell.” That is pride.

The other of Sewell’s deadly sins are:

- Staying stuck in the negative: deciding what we don’t believe, but never moving to embrace the positive values of what we do believe.
- Intellectualizing: we sometimes seem to like the sound of our own voices as we hold forth on this or that.
- Failing to embrace our faith with passion: Ralph Waldo Emerson left the Unitarian ministry because he found his co-religionists “corpse-cold.” We’ve made progress in that regard, but have a ways to go yet.
- Self-righteousness: some of us flat-out don’t believe in evil, not in others, and certainly not in ourselves, in spite of in-your-face evidence such as the Holocaust.
- Elitism: the tendency by some to regard the church as an organization where the elite gather to meet the needs of a superior social group.
- Failing to recognize our interdependence: we by-and-large hate to see ourselves as needing anything from anyone else. But we really do know better, don’t we?

Sewell asserts that these sins are deadly sins “because they deaden our lives, drain us of love and human connection.” And the opposite of sin is salvation: “that which connects us to others and to God (or to our highest values), that which gives us new life and transforms us.”

Whether you feel that Marilyn Sewell’s critique applies to you or not, it is useful as a call to take stock of yourself here at the start of a new year. Try and identify your own deadly sins that you might overcome them. And seek your own way to salvation by embracing your highest and most noble values and making them the basis of your life, day by day, and not alone, but in community.

So may it be.