

The Prophetic Tradition Continues: Jesus to MLK

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A few weeks ago I spoke about the origins and nature of the prophetic tradition as related in the Hebrew scriptures, or Old Testament. In a couple of weeks, I'll begin sharing the wisdom of some of the prophetic voices that are still speaking in our time. But today I'd like to continue the story by taking a look at some of the voices of that tradition that have passed through this world since those Old Testament days.

As we look at a number of those prophets this morning, we'll recognize many of the features I described three weeks ago: the call for a return to core values; an emphasis on individual righteousness and social justice; a balance of judgment and hope; and a focus on concrete historical realities rather than on ethical abstractions. And we will also see reaffirmed the notion that each generation needs its own prophetic voices, which address the particularities of their age.

Perhaps the paramount example of a prophet in the tradition of the early Jewish prophets is Jesus. Jesus was, of course, himself Jewish, and so was a natural heir to the tradition. The ethical teachings of Jesus, as recorded in the New Testament, certainly carry on the call for individual righteousness. And Jesus appeals to traditional Jewish law time and again. However, one of the special twists that Jesus brought to bear was an emphasis on the spirit, more than the letter of the law.

In fact Jesus got himself in trouble with his own coreligionists for some of his "outside the box" thinking and behavior. For instance, there was the case where he healed someone on the Sabbath, and was called to task for that violation of a basic law. His response: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." In other words, the laws existed because they served human needs, and so when other, greater, human needs came into conflict with the law, the law became secondary.

Jesus was critical of those Jews who were obsessed with the detail of the law, while ignoring its real underlying purpose; that is, to serve human needs. Jesus was particularly critical of those, like the Pharisees, who held to a strict interpretation of the law's "minor" points for personal advantage, while overlooking gross violations of "major" points of the law.

In fact, as far as Jesus was concerned, the whole of the Law could be boiled down to two commandments. He said

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind."

This is the first and great commandment. And there is a second like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The whole of the Law and the Prophets depends on these two commandments."

And of course Jesus was quoting here directly from the Hebrew scriptures [Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18]. And when asked "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus

responded with the story of the Good Samaritan, the moral of which is “everyone is your neighbor,” even those on the margins who are generally despised and neglected.

Jesus, in his ministry, paid particular attention to the marginal, the poor, the disinherited. When it comes to the dimension of judgment and hope, here is where the hope came in. Jesus passed judgment on those who neglected the needy and the outsider. But Jesus offered them a word of hope. In his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Howard Thurman (whose name keeps threading its way through this morning’s service), argues that the Gospel can be read as a manual of resistance for the poor and disenfranchised. But not resistance in its conventional sense of meeting force with force.

Jesus advocated a love of self and others that defeats fear and the hatred that decays our souls and the world around us. His alternative was to proclaim that “the Kingdom of Heaven is in us.” Or, as expressed by Mohandas Gandhi, another voice we’ll visit shortly, you need to “be the change that you want to see in the world.” Through the vision of Gandhi, and Thurman, and Martin Luther King, Jr., this alternative took the oppressed of the twentieth century beyond simply living in a fantasy of denial, to creating movements that actually changed the world. We’ll come back to that twentieth century chapter of the prophetic tradition momentarily. But first, I’d like to make a stop in the nineteenth century, to see how the prophetic tradition manifested in those days.

It turns out that at least a good share of the prophetic voices in nineteenth century America were Unitarians and Universalists. Unitarian historian Conrad Wright edited a book called *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, which contains a landmark address by each of three of our Unitarian forebears, William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker. These three giants helped to define American Unitarianism in its early decades. Let’s take a brief look at the them.

On May 5, 1819, William Ellery Channing delivered the sermon, “Unitarian Christianity” on the occasion of the ordination of Jared Sparks at the First Independent Church of Baltimore (now the First Unitarian Church). This was the birth of American Unitarianism as a distinct denomination, and this sermon defined its nature in distinction to the Congregationalism from which it emerged.

I’d like to point out one important parallel between what Channing did and what Jesus did in his time. Channing acknowledged the biblical foundation of Unitarian Christianity, even as Jesus acknowledged the heritage of Jewish law. But, like Jesus, Channing offered a new interpretational framework. He emphasized that “the Bible is a book written for men, in the language of men,” and that it is limited by the culture that produced it. Furthermore, he declared that reason must be used in the interpretation of scripture. Channing used his prophetic voice to critique the direction that Christianity had taken, and to offer a more open, expansive approach, which also simply made more sense.

Ralph Waldo Emerson made his famous Divinity School Address before the senior class of Harvard Divinity School on July 15, 1838. Emerson was critical, not only of orthodox Christianity, but also of Unitarianism itself. Conrad Wright describes the address as a “report of the universal decay of faith, and a protest against the triumph of formalism in the pulpit.” What he meant by formalism was preaching that didn’t connect with real life. In Emerson’s words,

The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life - life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from his sermon, what age of the world he fell in; whether he had a father or a child; . . . or any other fact of his biography.

So a part of Emerson's prophetic message was that a religion whose practice does not draw on and touch real life is in fact lifeless, and that, in the words of Conrad Wright, "the life of religion must be recreated anew in the souls of each successive generation."

Our third Unitarian prophet, Theodore Parker, preached his sermon, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity" at another ordination: that of Charles Shackford in Boston, on May 19, 1841. The prophetic task taken on by Parker was similar to that of many others; namely, to provide yet another interpretation of the religion of his heritage, in this case, again, Christianity. What Parker tried to do was to separate the truth and beauty of Christianity from the person of Jesus. As Conrad Wright put it, "For Parker, the beauty and greatness of the religion of Jesus lay in its reaffirmation of the primary and essential truths of all religion." Here again, we have that common feature of much of the prophetic tradition - putting the focus on those core values and truths of our religious faith, rather than on any particular personalities, or on any particular doctrines. For Parker, Christian doctrines fall in that category he calls transient. They vary with time and place. As for the permanent, Parker says "Christianity itself, that pure Religion, which exists eternal in the constitution of the soul and the mind of God, is always the same."

You may have noticed that all of the prophets I have mentioned have been males. That's largely a product of the male dominance of western history. But, there are female prophetic voices out there as well, and I want to mention, at least briefly, a couple of them. Margaret Fuller was a close friend of Emerson, and historian David Robinson suggests that her "close friendship with Emerson . . . was crucial for the intellectual development of both of them. . . Fuller was the preeminent feminist thinker of her day, taking the principles of Transcendentalism and broadening them into a thorough case for women's rights."

Another champion of women's rights was Olympia Brown, a leader in the woman suffrage movement in the nineteenth century. Brown was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1863, the first ordination of a woman by an American denomination. She served congregations for many years before resigning to devote herself fully to the cause of suffrage.

Perhaps the two most notable prophets of the twentieth century were Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Each confronted massive systems of injustice and oppression, but they did so with love and nonviolence.

Gandhi was a prophetic figure in the sense that he enunciated truths that needed to be enunciated, and illustrated what he said by the way he lived. Gandhi formulated and lived a philosophy of nonviolent resistance, for which he coined the term *satyagraha*, ("truth force" or "soul force"). And like many prophets before him, Gandhi transcended the limits, or limitations, of traditional religions, whether it be Christianity or Hinduism. In his words, "It is better to allow our lives to speak for us than our words. . . . Do not then preach the God of history, but show Him as He lives today through you."

You're probably familiar with the fairly direct influence of Gandhi on Martin Luther King, Jr. with respect to the use of nonviolent resistance. You may not know that Howard Thurman was an important part of that equation. A civil rights leader himself, a theologian, and an educator, Thurman was an early influence on King. He had even been a classmate of King's father at Morehouse College. Thurman's missionary work had taken him abroad where he met and conferred with Gandhi, and he undoubtedly shared that experience with King through his mentoring relationship. Walter Fluker, who has studied Thurman's writings, has stated, "I don't believe you'd get a Martin Luther King, Jr. without a Howard Thurman."

And then, with King, the prophetic tradition in some ways comes full circle. His speeches were filled with references to those good old Old Testament prophets. "Let justice roll down . . ." from Amos. Talk of having been to the mountaintop and seeing the promised land. And that statement of King's that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice"? That was actually said first by Theodore Parker, our Unitarian prophet. Yes, King carried on the prophetic tradition well, but applied his efforts to twentieth century problems and circumstances. His prophetic religion drew from the eighth century BCE, and from the time of Jesus, and even from the nineteenth century. But it was not stuck there. His was a prophetic voice tailored perfectly to his own times in the second half of the twentieth century. As such he is a good role model for those of us who aspire to prophetic witness in our times.

In support of such aspirations on the part of all of us, I'd like to draw on the thought of another Unitarian prophet, James Luther Adams, generally considered the greatest Unitarian theologian of the twentieth century. In his essay, "The Prophethood of All Believers, Adams wrote:

We have long held to the idea of the *priesthood* of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons. As an element of this radical laicism we need also a firm belief in the *prophethood* of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.

The Rev. George K. Beach (who spoke here last year), is an avid student of James Luther Adams, and he has edited several volumes of his works. Introducing the essay that I just quoted from, Beach reminds us that "The prophet invokes divine judgment

upon injustice and seeks radical spiritual and social transformation.” And he goes on to say, “The purpose of the church [as a prophetic institution] is . . . to expose us to perspectives that fall outside our commonly circumscribed, self-protected existences, in order that we shall have the opportunity to read the signs of the times and to change.”

Before I close, I want to recognize one feature that is common to all of those we consider prophets. That is courage. The courage to say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done. The courage to speak hard truths, to confront the powers that be, and systems and structures of evil and oppression, to take unpopular positions simply because they are right. The cost is personal sacrifice. If not a sacrifice of one’s life, as in the case of Jesus and Martin Luther King, at the very least a sacrifice of one’s comfort or personal well-being. We must each determine how much we are willing to sacrifice in the name of what is good and right and true.

And finally, lest we succumb to the temptation to place our prophets, both past and present, on a pedestal, and simply to worship them as heroes, I leave you with this important reminder from the Rev. Clinton Lee Scott:

Always it is easier to pay homage to prophets than to heed the direction of their vision. It is easier blindly to venerate the saints than to learn the human quality of their sainthood. It is easier to glorify the heroes of the race than to give weight to their examples. To worship the wise is much easier than to profit by their wisdom.

Great leaders are honored, not by adulation, but by sharing their insights and values. Grandchildren of those who stoned the prophet sometimes gather up the stones to build the prophet’s monument.

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And so, as we recognize and honor the prophetic voices of our heritage, may we make of them, not idols to worship, but exemplars to emulate. And may we take from their examples the inspiration to take our place in the noble tradition of the “prophethood of all believers.”

So may it be.