

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“**Prophecy, Forgiveness and Atonement**”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 16, 2011

Sermon

I first met Jim at the end of the Tuesday morning Conversation Among Friends meeting during my candidating week in Port Charlotte, Florida in the spring of 1993. Conversation Among Friends was a spontaneous conversation about the past week's sermon or the news or whatever was on people's minds. The conversation often found its way to two subjects: “Ain't it awful!” and “What is wrong with kids today?” At noon we'd adjourn for by a trip to a local restaurant to eat lunch.

That day, Jim stopped by to show us his signs from a counter demonstration at the Planned Parenthood clinic. The one I remember was “Don't shoot! I'm not a doctor.” You might remember that 1993 was the first time Dr. George Tiller was attacked in Kansas City. He was later murdered in 2009.

Fighting for a woman's right to have an abortion fit into a larger driving passion for Jim. His primary concern was global overpopulation. Jim was very fond of talking about the Rev. Thomas Robert Malthus. In the early 1800's Malthus noticed how food availability and disease regulated animal populations. He applied this to human populations, predicting dire consequences for unending human population growth. He rejected Rousseau's utopian ideas of endless progress. Malthus was convinced soon there would be devastating famine and disease.

Jim was also an enthusiastic supporter of our local Hemlock Society chapter. If people want to die, he'd argue, they should have the right of self-determination. He helped his wife, suffering through the end stages of cancer, do just that. They sailed out together into the Gulf of Mexico and only Jim came back.

Jim is the kind of person I think of when I think about someone I'd call a prophet. He was an atheist so he didn't get his message directly from God. He certainly didn't think of himself as God's mouthpiece. Yet, in so many other ways, he defines for me a Unitarian Universalist version of a prophet.

You might remember from two weeks ago (it is up on the web if you want to refer back to it) that I spoke about one of the sources in our Purposes and Principles of our association of congregations:

The words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

I hear a connection to what Jim was doing in that source. And he isn't alone. There are many other people like Jim right here and throughout our congregations. They care passionately about human rights, fighting sexism, genderphobia and racism. They resist the governmental-military-industrial war machine and advocate for the development of peace technology instead. They care deeply about the ways we are threatening the ability of our planet to sustain a wide diversity of life forms, particularly human life. They fight for worker and immigrant justice. They advocate for fair elections and democracy.

What is missing from this definition is a second component of the traditional prophets, predicting a less than robust future. Each of these areas I've mentioned also has a concern about what the future will look like if these problems are not addressed today. Even though Malthus' predictions haven't yet come true, it isn't looking so good right now as oil production likely declines in the near future.

What you often hear from the pulpit is encouragement to be a prophet, to stand up for what you believe and act. What I'd like to focus on today is how to listen to a prophet.

There are no shortage of prophetic messages and messengers coming at us. Whenever I open up my email, my "IN" Box is flooded with urgent messages asking me to act now. Every weekend there is a walk, bike, jog or run for a different cause. The media showcases the prophet of the day to warn us about the deficit, unemployment rates, declining economic competitiveness, failing schools, environmental and health threats, the list goes on and on. The more involved one is in paying attention to what is going on in the world, the more inundated you are. Sometimes it can feel like those prophets are surrounding us with their signs saying, "the end is near" screaming at us to do something about it.

If I agree, see the same warning signs, and feel the same urgency, I cheer the prophet and support their voice. During the push for marriage equality, I was at the Capital in my "Standing on the Side of Love" yellow t-shirt. The past two weeks I've been working in the background to support the effort to get SNUG funding. One response to prophetic predictions about the end of cheap energy and peak oil production is the Transition Movement. Richard Morell and I sponsored a lunch for a visiting organizer so she could meet local religious leaders. I'd love to be down in New York City occupying Wall Street. Last Sunday evening, I attended the "Occupy Albany" General Assembly meeting. If they haven't occupied anything yet, we'll have them here next Sunday evening. This is the kind of responding to the call of a prophet to act that I think we all appreciate.

What is much harder and more challenging is being the subject of a prophet's attack. Where many of us have probably encountered this most recently is around food. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals have been in the forefront of the fight against factory farming practices. Pigs and cows that live their entire life in a tiny pen, chickens that live in cages so small they can't spread their wings and the mishandling of dangerous waste products, are just a few of the ethical problems that have gotten national attention. Genetically modified foods have raised many concerns. Mono-culture growing techniques favoring single genetic lines create vulnerability to disease. The Cavendish banana will soon be wiped out by a virus in a decade or less because of this.

But more than how our food is produced, what we put in our mouth is under attack. Health concerns about sugar, corn syrup, salt, trans-fats, refined carbohydrates, preservatives and additives are raising our collective awareness that the yummy foods we love are dangerous. A day doesn't seem to go by when some food becomes a health suspect or a health savior. Right now its blueberries and pomegranates and omega 3's that will save us. French fries, burgers and soft drinks are likely to shorten our lives. Everybody is watching what their neighbor is eating and judging them for it.

Environmental concerns get even more intrusive into our daily lives. Do you get your morning coffee in a reusable cup? Certainly not a Styrofoam one I hope! Are you separating your recycling religiously? Bringing your bags to the market? Walking, riding your bike or taking the bus rather than driving? What about hanging your wash out to dry rather than using the dryer? Getting solar panels for your house? A hybrid car or an electric car? And of course you are composting ... aren't you?

Oh, and by the way, how generous have you been lately? Have you been caring for the widows and orphans, the poor and the hungry? What have you been doing to reduce your carbon emissions and stave off global warming? On this tenth anniversary of the war in Afghanistan yesterday, were you at the demonstration in Townsend Park? Did you march down to the Capital with the Occupy Albany folks?

Now I know there are more than a few saints in our congregation, but I hope many of you are getting a little uncomfortable right now. That's exactly my goal here, to get you to feel the pressure of the prophets on your conscience. In one moment, we're sitting comfortably on the griddle of life, minding our own business. Then the prophet comes along and turns up the heat under us.

Often I first react with resistance and irritation. I don't want to pay attention to one more problem in the world, thank you. My plate is pretty full already dealing with what I'm

dealing with. I know this happened for me when I heard that UUA General Assembly was contemplating working on the immigration issue as the focus of Justice GA. Immigration is a very difficult issue with much controversy. It isn't an easy issue for us like marriage equality. And, we haven't been focusing on it. Part of me wanted to take a pass in this one.

And then I started learning about the issue. And then I started feeling some shame, anger and guilt for what our government is doing. I particularly object to SCOMM and the mass incarceration of undocumented immigrants. Some of what our government is doing to immigrants is just plain wrong.

Where I feel the most guilt however is around food. You see, I really like meat. I really like the fact that meat is one of the few foods I have no digestive problems with whatsoever. Yet I really object to factory farming. When I buy meat, I buy ethically raised meat at the coop. But sometimes I eat it in restaurants. I severely doubt the chinese buffet I like is using pasture raised, organic chicken.

Even though I resist and get irritated, even though I don't like feeling shame, anger and guilt, I keep listening to the prophets. And this isn't easy. Many prophets deliver their messages in less than friendly ways. Jim sounded pretty heartless as I listened to him preach about the coming famine and disease that would decimate the population if people didn't stop having babies. It's not uncommon for prophets to care far more about their message than about the people they are trying to get to listen to them. They are often quite harsh and judgemental, as we heard two weeks ago when I spoke about the Biblical prophets.

And yet it is critical we open the envelope so we can receive the message. Our lives may depend on it.

I read in the Times Union recently that part of the management of the Pine Bush requires that they do controlled burns. There was a picture of people with their flame throwers creating a controlled forest fire. This destructive burning is actually good for the forest, a normal part of the life cycle of a forest that we have interrupted by preventing forest fires. The fires reduce the understory to allow new growth and reduce the fuel load in case an unplanned fire gets started.

And there are seeds that won't sprout without the heat of a fire.

I think of prophets as the heat that helps good things to sprout in us. Without their heat, we wouldn't be as self reflective; we might not notice the results of our collective actions. Also like a refiner's fire, our metal is purified when heat is applied.

The respected scholar of the Biblical Prophets, Walter Brueggeman, directs us to the larger vision of prophets old and new. He sees the work of the prophets as dismantling the politics of oppression and exploitation by countering it with the politics of justice and compassion. The prophets creatively imagine a different world than the one we know today that is centered on the health and welfare of people rather than the domination and control of people. The Biblical prophets recognized a God that cared for all people not for the power agenda of the elite. The task of the prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.

What all prophets seek to stimulate is an opening of receptivity and then a dramatic change in our minds. The Greeks had a name for this process, they called it metanoia. The literal translation as “change of mind” only captures some of the nuance of this term. In ancient times, the Eleusinian Mysteries were designed to stimulate metanoia over a period of nine days. Metanoia points to a human experience that directs us to a greater sense of ourselves and our interconnectedness to the whole of existence. The signs of metanoia in someone are a greater sense of good will, benevolence, inner peace and a sense of connection and integration with what is beyond us.

Listening to prophets and receiving their message, though difficult and painful at times, can also be the initiation of an experience of metanoia that will bring us home and open up our hearts. That process will naturally lead us to seeking forgiveness for the ways we have caused harm and to initiating acts of atonement.

Not because the prophets intimidated us to do it. Not because the prophets guilt tripped us or manipulated us to do it. But rather, because of an inner change of heart, initiated by deep listening, deep listening that points us toward the good.

Benediction

The western Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck wrote:

Repentance doesn't mean guilt. It means just really seeing what we've done out of our separateness; and then begins the process of being at-one-ment.

May we honor the prophetic voices in our lives and their potential to heal our divisions and help us transform ourselves toward the good.