

St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Fairfield, Connecticut
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Rector

Pentecost 16, Proper 21-B
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Psalm 19:7-14
James 4:7-12
Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

Testing the Prophets

Prophets are unsettling. They remind me of the X-files phenomenon—or the *Matrix* movies, or stories of alien abduction, things like that. We humans are fascinated by and perhaps a little fearful of anyone who seems to have contact with a reality beyond the one we're familiar with. We come up against that unsettling world when we encounter someone experiencing schizophrenia, or witness their stories in movies like *A Beautiful Mind* about the Nobel prize-winning mathematician John Nash, or the one about the schizophrenic concert pianist, David Helfgott.

Prophets were part of the ancient experience of Israel and of the early Church. The word *prophet* literally means 'one who speaks for God,' an unsettling notion on the face of it. In our first reading, Moses at God's behest shares the leadership burdens with seventy elders, and God blesses them with his spirit, just as he had blessed Moses, and makes them prophets.

But I'm with Joshua, and I feel unsettled when I encounter someone who is hearing voices I don't hear or seeing things I don't see. Keep those guys in the tent where the altar is! Moses is really quite amazing when he refused to accept Joshua's criticism of Eldad and Medad.

Recently I encountered a man claiming to be a prophet at one of the meetings the bishops have been having about the General Convention. He wasn't an Episcopalian, but he brandished a Bible and proclaimed that he knew the truth better than any one else. I have a feeling he or other members of his group will turn up here one of these days.

The unsettling power of prophets—and schizophrenics, and demagogues—comes from their association with the divine, the numinous, that mysterious world—both appealing and frightening—that is beyond ordinary experience. Their power is unsettling in part because we are utterly unable logically to validate or to disprove their claims. Try proving someone wasn't abducted by an alien. Try convincing someone who hears voices you don't hear that the voices he hears are not "real." No more can I convince the self-described prophet that I read the Bible more truthfully than he does.

Both Judaism in its earliest expressions and Christianity in its formative years welcomed and honored the office of prophet, unsettling though it was. But in both Christian and Jewish traditions there turned out to be an obvious problem with prophets. Prophets arrest your attention. But the problem becomes, how do you recognize the real thing? Who is really and truly speaking for God? Anyone can thunder, "Thus says the Lord!" But as the song from *Porgy and Bess* so eloquently says, "it ain't necessarily so." Just because I call myself a prophet doesn't necessarily make me one. Fortunately truth does not depend on who can shout the loudest.

Early in its history, the church had to develop ways of distinguishing true messages from God from false ones. I've counted nine warnings about false prophets in the NT—which led early on to the office of prophet dropping out of the Church's categories of leaders. It was an urgent problem then, just as it is now.

So how can we make those critical distinctions today? We get some truly vital guidance in our other readings today, from the Gospel, and in the Letter of James.

The first and decisive test is in today's Gospel. John comes running to Jesus—he sounds very upset—complaining about outsiders curing people:

Jesus! We saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't following us!

It is interesting and crucial to note that a mere 19 verses before this episode the disciples were complaining to Jesus because they had been unable to drive out a demon (Mk 9:19). Jesus called them "faithless," and after curing the boy he said, "All things can be done for the one who believes." The boy's father says—great quote—"Help my unbelief!" (Mk 9:23-24).

So the first and absolutely critical test of the prophet is belief. Does the prophet claim belief in the Lord Jesus? Jesus in the Gospel passage today is unforgettably harsh--and characteristically hyperbolic--about anyone who would destroy the faith of a believer, "the little ones who believe in me." Belief gets you into the kingdom of God, and getting there is more important than even an eye or a hand or a foot.

The second test is based in Jesus' further teaching to the disciples: "Whoever is not against us is for us. No one who does a deed of power in my name will . . . speak evil of me." Or in the words of James in the Epistle for today, "do not speak evil against one another," and "do not judge your neighbor."

So this test is to listen to who is judging and who is refraining from judging. Listen to who wants to divide the church into those who are for us and those who are against us. Such divisions are not grounded in Jesus' teachings and are clearly false prophecy.

There is another test, more subtle. It grows out of Jesus' invitation to us to see who is able to cast out demons, and who isn't; who does deeds of power in Jesus' name and who doesn't.

Now the way to gauge the casting out of demons is not by having face-offs between priests in exorcism contests. Nor is it to claim that in our present dispute that homosexuality is something that can or should be cured by psychotherapeutic intervention. It is important to know that the professional associations of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers licensed to do counseling all consider attempts to change sexual orientation unethical. In my opinion, it is no more ethical—or possible—to change an adult homosexual's nature than it is possible or ethical to change my heterosexual nature. If you could, it wouldn't be therapy. It would be brainwashing.

So what then are the demons that belief casts out? What are the deeds of power done by those who believe? We name them by assessing what St. Paul calls "the fruits of the Spirit" in contrast to "the works of the flesh" in the fifth chapter of his Letter to the Galatians (see Gal. 5:16-26).

Paul says "the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these" (19-21), and he warns that those who remain in such turbulent ways of living "will not inherit the kingdom of God." That's quite a long list.

What's very clear is that the list points to disordered life, life that is self-directed rather than God-directed, life that is not directed toward faithfulness, fidelity, commitment--to true godliness. These are the demons that belief casts out—beginning with oneself. Disordered life is in fact deadly. For proof, just surf through a few TV channels or watch a few movies or read a few newspaper pages or just consult with a few friends and neighbors to see just how miserable people are when they lead faithless and pointless lives, even when they pretend that a disordered life is a good life.

Those demons of disordered living arise out of the abuse of self and others that comes from not respecting oneself and other human beings as creatures of God—one of our commitments in the Baptismal Covenant. Those are the demons that are driven out by belief in Jesus.

Replacing the demons, belief brings us the gift of the Spirit, and being led by the Spirit we experience what Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit"; and what a different list it is!

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

A few verses on he adds humility ("not . . . conceited"), the first of the beatitudes (Matt. 5:1). It's worth noting that Moses, the greatest leader of ancient Israel, is also described as "very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3). And one of Paul's most amazing passages about Jesus is that "he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death--even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8).

Paul himself summarizes holy living by saying "the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). "The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

So we can test prophets by assessing the fruits of the spirit that they display—or don't. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, humility. In other words, faith working through love. Warning of false prophets, Jesus himself said, "By their fruits you will know them," adding that "a bad tree cannot bring forth good fruit" (Matt. 7: 15-20).

Right now, the most important of these fruits of the spirit may well turn out to be humility and patience. That's because, in the current controversy, we will have to await the passage of time before the fruits of the respective sides become clear, to see where the fruits of the spirit really reside. And while we wait, we do well to heed James's advice, humbling ourselves before the Lord, and refraining from speaking evil against one another (4:8). I am absolutely convinced in the stand I have taken in our current controversy; but in humility I have to wait to see whether time will prove me right.

There is every reason to expect that both sides can live in charity with each other, sharing the belief in the Lord Jesus that most deeply unites us all. I surely hope so. There's every reason for every one of us to kneel at the altar rail together, saying in the words of "Rock of Ages," "nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." Every one of us is a forgiven sinner, and our prayer rightly is that of today's psalm: "Who can tell how often he offends? Cleanse me from my secret faults."

We, thank God, can worship side by side as we wait. But we have to wait, until the fruits become clearer. And it's agonizing to wait. We want to know, and know right now, who's right. We want there to be firm, certain ground under our feet.

But faith and hope are themselves about waiting. As the letter to the Hebrews says, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not [yet] seen" (11:1). And there is

tremendous power in the very human condition of not knowing. That's precisely why faith can do so much, why "all things can be done for one who believes," as Jesus said to the father of the boy whom the disciples were unable to heal (Mk. 9:23).

That's because we stake our lives and our immortal souls on what we can never absolutely know. And that's why deep faith brings with it an adrenalin rush, because we are staking our immortal souls on a conviction we cannot be absolutely certain of. That's why Kierkegaard called it a "leap of faith"; and paradoxically there is God's own risk-taking energy in that moment, when we reach out in faith and touch belief just beyond our knowing, over and over again, and so experience the divine energy that brought the cosmos into being and gave us as the human creatures within it the power of choosing to make ourselves and our world into God's realm—or not.

And that's the challenge of the moment. Come to think of it, it's the same challenge delivered to Adam and Eve.

Well, at least we know where we are, and as the French say, the more things change the more they stay the same. Help our unbelief, Lord, and grant us the gifts of belief, even the fruits of the spirit and life eternal, and the grace to do your healing work in your holy name.

Amen.

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