

Are You Sure I'm Not a Prophet?

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"You are the salt of the earth...."

You are the light of the world...." (Matthew 5: 1-2, 16)

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The temptation to wrap ourselves in the cloak of the prophet is just too much for some folks to resist. We've probably all heard such self-proclaimed prophets, including some in a pulpit.

I think of the terror and hurt that struck to the heart a young woman I know who had come to a church one Sunday looking for safety. She had just escaped from a dangerous and abusive marriage. Sitting there still literally bruised, holding her baby, the preacher tells the congregation that if you are having trouble with your spouse, it is your duty to bear it. I remember distinctly the tears in her eyes, as she asked, "Do I have to go back to him?"

I do not know the mind of God, but I truly can't believe that God can be less merciful than we would be. And I shudder to think of the power a self-proclaimed Prophet carries to wound and destroy lives in the name of God.

I recall another instance that still bothers me whenever I remember it. A seminary professor was preaching. She stood up and read a biblical text which would never again be referred to in the sermon, even casually. And from her perch in the pulpit she proceeded to pour contempt on all of those who didn't agree with her choice of candidate for an elected office. Her judgement was supported chapter and verse by her political party's platform and underscored by the talking points of her favorite television commentators.

I remember sitting there in my usual pew, listening to this "sermon," which, in my view, abused the sanctity of the pulpit. And I remember asking myself why I was so uncomfortable. I probably agreed with many of the points she made and if I heard her speaking in some other setting might have applauded. But not there.

As I walked out of the chapel that day, I felt that a wonderful opportunity to bring us all under the comfort and challenge of God's Word had been missed.

Of course, we've also seen the flip-side of so-called prophetic preaching; those preachers who believe that their calling is to beat the stuffing out of their congregations Sunday after Sunday, until their people can't stand it anymore. And when they are asked to leave the congregation, they shake the dust from their feet sure that they have been rejected for being Prophets, when, in reality, the people just got fed up with them being jerks.

Dan Zeluff, in his hilarious little book, *There's Algae in the Baptismal Font* has a name for this peculiar condition. He calls it the "I must be a Prophet, why else would they be stoning me" Syndrome.

But, of course, the office of self-proclaimed Prophet isn't restricted to preachers. Lots of us can become so passionate about a particular need or cause that we become an annoyance to our neighbors and hindrance to the cause rather than a help.

But here's the thing: The Good News of the Gospel is really far more challenging than any platform from any political party ever organized. It resonates more deeply with the human heart. And it has the power to change our minds and our lives to make us the sort of people God created us to be.

And the Gospel works these wonders in the most surprising way: the Gospel operates almost entirely in the *indicative voice* rather than the *imperative*.

You know what I mean? I mean that Jesus does not tell us so much what we ought to do, as remind us of who we are. This is the first thing we have to say about Christian ethics, our doing flows naturally from our being.

That, my friends, is the most revolutionary message possible. It is to this message I would like to turn our attention this morning in one of the most familiar passages in the whole Bible, so familiar that its images have entered into common phrases and inspiring speeches far beyond the walls of any church.

It is so familiar (and I blush to say this), but until this week, I hadn't taken into account the most crucial thing about this passage, even though it is so obvious any child could have pointed it out.

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:1, we are told:

"And seeing the multitudes, Jesus went up into a mountain, and when he was there, his disciples came to him, and he opened his mouth and taught them...."

You can picture the scene. Jesus finds a spot to stand, his disciples sit at his feet, the multitude gathers around to hear him.

First he speaks those words we've come to know as the Beatitudes, and then our text for today:

"Blessed are you, when people shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for they persecuted the prophets who went before you in just the same way. You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its savour, how shall the salt be salted. It is good for nothing, but to be cast out, and trodden under foot. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do you

light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine, so that people may see the good things you do, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Now, here's what I had never taken into account before when I read this text.

Jesus wasn't only speaking to his disciples, but to the multitude and the disciples, this vast mixed company of future apostles, friends, family members, hangers-on, religious opponents, and the merely curious. There might even have been some Roman soldiers on the edges of the crowd, just in case things got out of hand. Jesus is saying to all of them, all of them. You are salt. You are light. Right now. Already. That's what you are.

This wasn't an in-house sermon. It is not, to use a sociological term, sectarian. Once again, we observe that Jesus isn't setting about to start a new religion, he is showing us how to be human, like him.

Just listen again to what Jesus says to this mixed gaggle of hearers: "You are salt; so, just be salty. You are light; don't hide."

And if people scoff at you for being who you are and living as I'm encouraging you to live, and they revile you, and they reject you, and they call you names, and spread lies about you, don't sweat it so much.

The real prophets never did get tenure.

There are always people who believe that retaliation and revenge are tougher than kindness and generosity. Apparently, they've never tried it. But God knows. And in your heart you know it too.

There are always going to be people who think you've got to push and shove others around if you want to get noticed. They may think you're a sap for not boasting, for not thinking of yourself first. Well, God doesn't think you're a sap. God blesses you. And remember, light shines so others can see better, not so we can get noticed.

There are always going to be folks who think that feeling deeply, grieving, mourning, hurting for your own losses and the losses of others is weakness. God knows that grief is the cost of love, and it is price worth paying. Taste the salt in your own tears. And be blessed.

There are going to be people who believe that violence is stronger than peace, and they aren't going to like who you are and what you do if you don't agree with them. Well, God loves you, and God is out there working for peace and wholeness every day.

There are going to be cynics who make fun of "do-gooders," who think the politician who works for years to put in wheelchair ramps at crosswalks is an idiot if he doesn't use his

influence to line his own pockets. But God thinks a lot more highly of do-gooders, naive as they may seem, than those who would rather just look out for number one.

And, of course, there will always be those who think mercy breeds contempt, that purity of heart is all very well for children but not grown-ups, and would drive a wedge between every friendship if it would advance their own interests. But God has his hand on the scales of history, because the reign of the cruel, the violent and the vengeful seems always to come to a bitter end as history makes it great arc toward God's own goodness.

If you ever want to see a look of pure wonder and bliss, place a four year old in front of a television and let them watch one of those old broadcasts of Mr Rogers' Neighborhood. In seconds, they will be transfixed. And you know it isn't because of dazzling special effects and beautifully produced music, because there isn't any of that. It is just a gentle person who looks right into your eyes and reminds you of something you hope is true: "I love you just the way you are."

And those who think that Presbyterian minister on the screen in his tatty sweater and house shoes is corny or simplistic just haven't figured out what the four year old has. Mr. Rogers is holding up a mirror to these little guys and saying, "Just look at yourself the way God sees you: loved." He is sending them out into the world with the gospel ringing in their ears. Remember: You were created out of pure love by the God who is love.

I can almost imagine that moment on the Mount when Jesus holds up a mirror to this scattered crowd of the devoted and the curious and even the angry, and says:

Look and see who you are in your heart of hearts, not what you ought to be, but who you are. Salt. Light. That's you! Be who you are!

Look and see your face in God's heart the moment God called you into being. That's you, and no one else can be that person but you. Be your true self, let it through, and don't worry about what the cynics say.

If you don't add the salt that *you are* to what God's cooking, an essential ingredient will be missing, it just won't taste right.

And if you don't let your light shine, we're all going to miss something irreplaceable.

Amen