

PROPHETIC SPEECH: WRIGHT OR WRONG?

By The Rev. Rick Marshall

I have been a minister in the United Church of Christ, serving the Brea Congregational UCC for almost 23 years. I'm proud to be in the UCC. It speaks truth to power—and that takes courage, because the powers that be don't like to be criticized or held accountable. The UCC has been one of those voices in our culture that stands for issues concerning justice and peace, inclusiveness and pluralism—issues that are sometimes controversial. It often ends up in the media for taking such stands.

Recently Barack Obama's pastor, The Rev. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of the Trinity UCC church in Chicago, has been in the news. Someone was probably hired to go through perhaps thousands of his sermons to find that one phrase or two that would make him look bad, even mad. The next step was to throw those statements into the meat grinder of hate radio and 24-hour news channels in a constant loop, holding him up to ridicule. He is accused of being vile and unpatriotic, hateful and crazy. Who would listen to such a preacher? There has been a chorus of voices from the media, all of them raising their fists together and shouting, "stone him, stone him, stone him." Of course, the political agenda to discredit Barack Obama is obvious. Having preached over 2,200 sermons myself, I shudder to think what an enemy of mine might find if he or she combed through all of my public statements, looking for a phrase or a few words that would make me look silly, unpatriotic, or crazy. What minister could possibly withstand that kind of scrutiny?

There is a larger issue here. What role does the church play in society? Does the prophetic voice of the church have a place in our culture? The question is, has The Rev. Jeremiah Wright engaged in hate speech or does he stand in the long tradition of prophetic speech? Whatever your faith tradition, I challenge you to read the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Read Isaiah or Jeremiah or Amos. Prophets were preachers and some of them were fiery. They often engaged in what we would consider inflammatory speech. They were accused by their fellow citizens of being dangerous and hateful and unpatriotic. People didn't want to hear them. If they lived today, we would be fed sound bites from Jeremiah and Isaiah on every radio and TV channel and in the newspapers, reporting the latest crazy thing they said. And people, good people all over the country, would raise their voices in shock and protest and all call together, "stone him, stone him, stone him." Back then, they often did. In fact there is a long tradition of mistreating and killing the prophets. Look in the New Testament at what happened to John the Baptist. He was some desert-addled preacher who seemed crazy. But he spoke truth to those in power, which offended them, and he had his head delivered on a platter.

Jesus was a prophet. Read some of his statements in the gospels. He often didn't make sense. Once some neighbors asked his family to come and take him home because they thought he was deranged. Another time, angry villagers dragged him to a cliff and tried to throw him to his death. He offended many. He, like all the prophets, spoke truth to power. The last time Jesus came to Jerusalem he said sadly, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you." Every society, every nation and country and empire has trouble listening to its prophets. They want to silence them, discredit them, kill them.

Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God over against the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of God is a vision of life where there is peace and justice, where we treat one another with respect, where we treat creation with respect and recognize God as the Creator. The kingdoms of this world are motivated by fear and greed and power. Much of the gospel story is about those in power trying to figure out how to silence Jesus. They accused him of treason, of being unpatriotic, threatening, and crazy, and they brought him into court. If he were alive today, and sound bites of his preaching were put into a constant media loop, we would all be shocked and together in one voice we would shout, "crucify him, crucify him, crucify him."

The Bible says many things, but one thing is clear: the Bible is against empire. It sees empire as motivated by fear, greed, and power. The Bible provides the most powerful critique of empire found anywhere. Empires become unjust and oppressive and abusive. The United States of America is an empire by any measure or definition, perhaps the greatest empire ever to exist. This puts us in a very uncomfortable position with God. Our government, the powers that be, must be held accountable to values of peace and justice, where the common good is respected. Who will hold it accountable?

The church is accountable neither to any powers that be, nor to any nation or country, nor to any ethnic group or political party. We are called to a higher allegiance; we swear allegiance to the Kingdom of Peace with Justice and the Common Good.

If the church loses its prophetic voice, it loses its soul.

The question for the church is this: are we going to be cheerleaders for the powers that be, or are we going to speak truth to power, holding those in power to a standard of justice, and peace, and the common good? And if the latter, what language should we use? A test to determine if a statement is hate speech or prophetic speech is this: does the speech use religion to oppress people and promote structures of injustice and oppression and aggression, or does it challenge the powers that be?

The creating, transforming power of God is more powerful than any nation, kingdom, country, army, or economy. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a divine rebuke against empire and its claims to being ultimate. It is a final statement that God's persuasive power will overcome coercive power.

So before you pick up a stone along with the mob in response to The Rev. Jeremiah Wright, think about the treatment of prophets. Think long and hard. Do we want to be a country that abuses and kills its prophets? So far, our track record is not good, not good at all.

The Rev. Rick Marshall