

“A Prophetic Body”

OT 14A-18

Mark 6: 1-13

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Do you have a favorite genre of literature? Fiction? Non-Fiction? Folk Tales? Mysteries? Histories? Biographies? For the longest time, I thought I didn't enjoy reading. The phrase “reading for pleasure” was oxymoronic. But I had associated reading with fiction—with all the works I had to read in school. So when I discovered the world of non-fiction... well, suddenly my perspective on reading for pleasure evolved significantly.

But that's books. How about cinema? Do you have a favorite type of movie? Drama? Romance? Comedy? My wife loves suspenseful, scary movies. Not me. I'm much more of a fan of the stupid humor genre. Which probably says a bit more about me than I should let on... but I digress.

How about sermons? Do you have a favorite kind of sermon you like to hear? Because believe it or not, there's just about as many different styles of sermons as there are genres of literature and movies.

For example,

- There's the **expository sermon**, in which a preacher goes through a particular passage of Scripture verse by verse, interpreting it and applying each phrase as the preacher goes.
- There's the **narrative sermon**, in which the sermon essentially re-tells a Bible story in a way that helps listeners hear or see a new perspective in an otherwise familiar story.
- Then there are **didactic sermons**, which seek to teach a specific point that Scripture makes.
- There are **pastoral sermons**, which address a particular pain, or need, or problem in a community with the hope and grace of God.
- And then... then there's **prophetic sermon**. A sermon in which the preacher assumes the role of prophet, and speaks a word of Scripture that is meant to confront, maybe even offend the congregation as it challenges them to live more fully into God's way and will.

Now... almost all preachers have their preferred styles. I, for example, am not an expository preacher. I find my comfort much more in narrative sermons.

But I also think preachers should be willing and able to preach in a variety of styles, if for no other reason than different parts of Scripture lend themselves to different styles.

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So I do, from time to time, preach what I'd call a prophetic sermon... a sermon intended to challenge confront you... even though prophetic sermons are not my preferred cup of tea.

For one thing, when I preach a prophetic sermon... I'm not only preaching to you... I'm preaching to myself, too. So please know that when I preach a challenging word to you, I'm

reminding myself of what I need to explore anew... reminding myself of those places in me that might need new life, or fresh examination, or real repentance.

But even more than that, to put it plainly... I don't particularly enjoy confrontation. And a good prophetic sermon should confront various expectations or assumptions... even knowing that some people might understandably take offense to what is said. I mean, who likes to be confronted?

And yet... and yet... is the Gospel of Jesus Christ not confrontational? Is the Gospel not offensive sometimes? I mean, take Jesus' call to sell all that we own and give our money to the poor. If that command doesn't confront us... if it doesn't offend us... it's only because we're ignoring... rationalizing it away as hyperbole... as if Jesus couldn't possibly really want us to sell our stuff and give the money to those who need it more than we do.

Similarly, we may think it's a nice ideal—Jesus' claim that the last shall be first and the least should be made the greatest. That is, until the policy benefiting the poor and the outcast means we have to give a little more ourselves... shed a bit of our own privilege... take a step back so someone we judge as less worthy than us gets put in front of us.

So let's put it this way. If Jesus reincarnated here and now, and examined the way we live, do we think for one second he'd say we've been doing enough? Would he say he's pleased with how much we've done to serve the hurting? To feed the hungry? To welcome outcast? To break down society's dividing walls?

Personally, I suspect Jesus would tell us how much he loves us. He'd tell us that he's always been with us and always will be. I think he'd remind us that we're salt and light, gifted and called to do amazing things—divine things—in this world... and then I suspect he'd rip into the priorities our weekly schedules and checking accounts show we live by.

For throughout all four gospels, that's essentially what Jesus did, isn't it? 1) He shared the love of God... 2) He called forth the gifts of God within the people of God... 3) and then he'd call people out for failing to use God's gifts within them for God's purposes.

And he didn't always challenge folks subtly... or even nicely. I mean, Jesus said some pretty offensive stuff. It's part of what got the man killed. And while a lot of things he said don't necessarily offend us today, as we're some 2000 years removed from the time he said it, that doesn't mean he still wasn't trying like heck to straighten out humanity's crooked priorities.

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We see it in our Gospel lesson this morning... where Jesus visits his hometown of Nazareth.

When the Sabbath day came, Mark says Jesus entered the synagogue and began to teach. At first, the people were amazed. One of their own had made good—coming to possess a wisdom that “astounded” them. But somewhere along the line, Jesus said something that turned the tide. And the crowd's astonishment turned to anger, as they decided they didn't want hear any more of what Jesus had to say.

Now, Mark doesn't tell us exactly what Jesus said ticked the Nazarenes off so much. Neither does Matthew or John. But Luke... Luke spills the beans. Luke says that “while the crowd in Jesus' hometown synagogue initially warmed to his message... (things took a turn for

the worse) when Jesus had the audacity to suggest God’s love extends even to those outside (their) clan... even to ethnicities and social classes many thought were banned from the heart of God (like Gentiles and lepers).”¹

Folks became furious when one of their own challenged their categories of who’s in and who’s out. They couldn’t stomach the thought that God’s love included people they didn’t want to love. They hated to realize the rumors were all true. Jesus really did things embrace lepers and eat with known sinners, proclaiming their forgiveness rather than their condemnation.

And because of all of that... just like that... Mark says, “They took offense at him.”

It didn’t matter that Jesus could work miracles or preach like no one they’d ever heard. The people of Nazareth weren’t having it. “They took offense at him.”

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Amazing, when you stop and think about it. Jesus wasn’t telling the Nazarenes that they were bad people. He didn’t call them names. He never said, “Woe is you!”

He was telling them to expand their horizons... he was challenging their assumptions... trying to help them see the world differently—to see *people* differently—to see how others—those they considered to be outsiders—were loved by God, and therefore called to be loved by them.

Yet, that challenge offended them so much, the people of Nazareth kicked the very presence of God out of their midst.

Goes to show... prophetic messages are both hard to deliver... and hard to hear.

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Still, even though they kicked him out, Jesus didn’t seem offended by their response, did he? He just accepted the fact that he couldn’t force folks to accept the truth he offered, let alone live by it.

So rather than obsess over people’s response to him—a response he couldn’t control—Jesus simply shook the dust off his feet and moved on to the next village. You see, Jesus refused to let other people’s anger affect him. He refused to let other people’s anxiety prevent him from living out and proclaiming the truth of who he was, and the kingdom he’d come to reveal.

Which is exactly what he charged the disciples to do in the second part of our lesson this morning. Did you catch it? It’s a tremendously important transition in Mark’s Gospel. After Jesus was kicked out of his hometown, he decided it was time for his disciples to move from *following* a prophet to *doing* some of the prophecy themselves. So he gathered them up. And just before he sent them off in pairs into the surrounding villages proclaiming the kingdom of God, Jesus first instructed them not to take anything with them, but to rely on the hospitality of others. And if they should be rejected by others the way he had been rejected in Nazareth... well, “That’s okay,” Jesus said. “Just shake the dust off your feet and get back to proclaiming and revealing the kingdom of God’s love.”

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It’s the quintessential reminder, friends, that the Church—you and I and followers of Jesus everywhere—we not only follow the prophet, Jesus Christ, we are called into this prophetic

¹ Bob Setzer Jr. in Pastoral Perspective article on Mark 6: 1-6a in Feasting on the Gospels: Mark, edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 166.

ministry ourselves. Like it or not, part of being the Church includes the call to model God's love in the here and the now. Which means part of being the church includes the call to tear down the dividing walls that create communities of us and communities of them. Just as part of being the Church includes the call to stand up for those who can't stand for themselves... while speaking out for those who've been silenced either by oppressive people or oppressive systems.

And there is no sugar coating it. As our lesson today forewarns... some people will be offended by this and reject what we have to say.

Call for unconditional love not for some but for all, and some will be offended.

Talk of tearing down the dividing walls that separate some people from others based on income or ethnicity or sexuality or citizenship, and some will be offended.

Confront parts of a capitalistic system that inherently favors the first while marginalizing the last, some will be offended.

Challenge components of society's systemic racism, and some will be offended.

Talk of the need to care for creation even when it's not financially beneficial to do so, and some will be offended.

Critique societal violence and society's use of violent weapons... Invite enemies to embrace rather than harm... and some will be offended.

But it's what we're called to do—to live and speak *prophetically*. There's no getting around it. We are called to challenge and confront this world's ways with the ways of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. We're called to be the prophets of God's kingdom until the peace of Jesus Christ we have come to know spreads from you and me... to each and all.

For that, in the end, is always the goal of Christian prophecy—not to proclaim our way, but God's way. Not to proclaim our own truth, but truth as we understand it through the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ...

The one who's always trying to expand our horizons...

The one who's always challenging our assumptions...

The one who's always confronting our ways with God ways...

And thank God for that!

Amen.