

Right out of college my first job was serving as Youth Pastor for the two combined General Conference Mennonite churches in Hillsboro, Kansas...Trinity and First Mennonite. The experience was a good one for Gretchen and me, and now that I talk with Timothy as he contemplates job offers, and future direction I reflect on the many ways that that position stretched me. There are certainly things I might do differently in that same role now, with additional experience, but it was a meaningful stage of life and I created some life-long, cherished relationships.

As I have been ruminating on a message for this morning and drawing on the last Chapter of Richard Rohr's book the Tears of Things, Prophetic Wisdom for an Age of Outrage, my mind kept returning to something I tried for our midweek worship time together as a youth group while I was youth pastor. In my attempts to be relevant, and cool, I had the idea that if the youth wanted to bring a current popular song and explain how it can be heard through a Christian lens or in a faith context I would learn it, and we would sing it. The youth who brought the song would reflect to the group how the song represents Christian tenets. That was an interesting experience and there are many songs from that time that I hear very differently because of that experience.

If you listened to some of the sermons that Pastor Caleb Yoder preached while serving as our pastor here at Alexanderwohl you would remember similar reflections to the books and movies of J.R. Tolkien. This summer we have been enjoying watching Tolkien's Lord of the Rings series in the evenings together. It has been fun to do this with Timothy as these would be movies that we watched together when he was just a youngster. I am

not sure why, but we have been watching these movies this time with subtitles. It has been striking the many lines that seem prophetic, with profound correlations to the biblical counsel of our prophets, most especially “the big J as Lois calls him” Jesus.

Chapter 10 is titled “It All Comes Down to Love”, and Rohr begins by describing the philosophical principle called “Occam's Razor” taken from Franciscan Brother William of Ockham. As Ockham put it, “The answer that demands the fewest assumptions is likely the correct one.” If you want to discover the truth, shave away as many assumptions, beliefs and complicated explanations as possible. The better answer is almost always the simpler one. Rohr ascertains that the prophets are those who simplify all questions of justice, reward, and punishment by a simple appeal to divine love. God’s infinite, self-giving care is the only needed assumption, cause, factor or possible variable in the drama of creation...all else can be shaved away. This is the nature of mature religion - simple and clear.

What we have learned in our journey through the prophets is that they are truth tellers, which means that they make it clear that death and evil are also part of the deal. Our Sunday School class read this book together with Lois and Chris. Each week I came to class and said the same thing, essentially, “nothing has changed”. We still make foolish human choices and find ourselves in a world surrounded by war, hunger, violence, sadness and struggle. The tears of the prophets reflect the evil that they saw in the world. Evil presented in our shadow sides as humans, our darkness. The darkness that causes us to demonize one another. The prophets wanted to “out the demon”. By uncovering the real hidden problem, you help it lose

much of its potency. We find ourselves also having shadow sides that are living in that darkness. Darkness - a state in which we cannot see - and once exposed to light, our own darkness is illuminated.

We think that attacking the other side makes us saintly or heroic yet are living the same us-vs-them assumptions that got us into trouble in the first place. Letting the light illuminate our own darkness and having the grace and love to accept and forgive not just the other but ourselves. Paul writes prophetically in Ephesians:

Avoid the futile works of darkness by exposing them

We are ashamed even to speak of our works of darkness

But anything exposed to the light will be illuminated

And anything illuminated turns to light itself (5:12-14)

When Jesus said we are the light of the world he said we MUST extend this light to everyone in the house. Light does what light does – it clarifies, allowing us to see fully. Divine light does not inflate us with pride of “I know” but illuminates all of us with “I am too”. To quote Rohr – “Both light and love reveal NOT our separate superiority, but rather our radical sameness. That quality is, in fact, the way you can tell divine light from human glaring”.

Christianity is not a “purity cult” where we prove our superiority. We all must admit that we are all prone to the same failings that we see in others. In Mark 14, one after another the apostles say, “Surely not I” when Jesus announces one of them will betray him. So back to my time as youth

pastor. My taste in music is very eclectic, and one of the groups I have listened to for years is Alice in Chains, very much not a faith-based band, but I love their song Rooster and think I have heard it to be a song about the Vietnam war. I don't even know if I have the chorus correct, but I always hear "yeah here comes the rooster". While I was mowing last week it struck me that I am Peter. You remember Peter, Jesus told Peter the night before his crucifixion, that before the rooster crows, Peter will deny him 3 times. Surely not I. How quick am I to be guided by my shadow side, and like the apostles tell Jesus surely not I., and then "here comes the rooster" illuminating the light exposing my own darkness.

Prophets are the ones that have allowed the decentering of their own selves, in favor of the center that has shown itself as Love. God is not "like us". We tend to see things as we are and have the unfortunate tendency to create God in our own image. In Genesis we know that we are created in God's image, not God created in our image.

Throughout the book, Rohr suggests that we have not understood or appreciated prophets because of their unique job which allowed them to both love and honor Jewish customs, liturgy and tradition, yet at the same time criticizing those same when they allowed the people to ignore the poor.

When we as Americans read the prophets, we cannot tell if the prophets are Republican or Democrat. They seemingly jump between cautioning a return to tradition and at other times urging radical departures from tradition. I like how Rohr says it, "We seldom see such truth-telling

prophets, mainly because there is no one to offer much internal and intelligent critique of their own side”. My dad always talked about the healthiest churches have different voices and perspectives and the love to let the light expose their inner failings and be receptive to hearing those, and most importantly the divine love to listen, and love in dialogue together. That is why I still carry so much sadness over the many wonderful, diverse voices that have left congregations in search of like-minded voices, and affirmation for opinion.

Prophets should be seen as wholesome, educated on issues, insider and outsider, the loyal opposition who understands how one can be loving and respectful toward all sides. Back to Rohr, “ We need someone who is on the loving but critical edge of any developing group, a truth seeker who has dealt with his or her own wounds. Wounded healers are what we need...we do not need wounded wounders!” The fruit of that reformation should not be past tense, but should be that the world says about us, as Tertullian did, “See how they love one another!”

It is no secret that the traditional church is shrinking. As I understand it, this same space on a Sunday morning not that long ago would have been filled with over 400 people. That wouldn't be the case just for this space, but many sanctuaries across the United States. I talked to a close friend that grew up in the church and no longer attends. We discuss it often and I offer my reasons, but he said something that was a bit of a gut punch and challenge to me, and to you. I think he framed it “People my age” though I would argue Humanity is desperate for what church should be providing, but it is not what we experience. We don't experience realness. He

equated that to being more caught up in sacred things, traditions or the pomp of pretending to be something we are not. It reminds him of the quote, you should meet your spouse on Saturday night, not Sunday morning. The essence of the quote is that the person we are in the pew is not our authentic self, willing to allow our own failings and weakness to show, with receptiveness to let others help us in this struggle. To me this was a bit of the “sacred criticism” of the prophets that is actually given out of love.

The idea of an infinite God being caught up in a naive reward-punishment worldview must be undone by the deeper gospel of unconditional love and respect if we ever expect change. We will not understand the compelling message of the prophets so long as we allow fear, threat and self interest to dominate the story. Rohr asks “Can a pious pro-lifer ever admit war, capital punishment and social justice are also pro-life issues? Can the political left recognize its therapeutic bias, its individualism, its reflections of transcendence, its lack of support for the common good? Our small, myopic agendas have nullified the triumphant work of grace for too long.”

In the Unexpected Journey, the first Hobbit movie, which we coincidentally were watching this week, the character of Gandolf the Grey said this when questioned why he would put the fate of the world in the hands of a small, common, hobbit:

He said, “Some believe that it is only great power that can hold evil in check but that is not what I have found, I have found it is the small things,

everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keeps the darkness at bay...simple acts of kindness and love.”

As we wrap up the series on the Prophets and see Jesus as prophet we reflect on the message of his ministry, so well articulated in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ unconditional love for each of us, the widow, the orphan, the adulterer, the wounded, and the constant reminder of his challenge to those who pretended to be illuminating that light in superiority, that rather they should allow the light to expose their inner weakness, failings, hypocrisies, and sin. Jesus’s willingness to forgive, and to walk with us is the example of love that should continue to guide us.

Paul tells the church in Corinth..

Love is patient, kind, does not envy, it does not boast, is not proud, it does not dishonor others, is not self seeking, not easily angered. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

This is my answer to my friend for why church matters. We aren’t where we can be, but this is a community that I experience the small things, the little words, nudges, apologies, listening ears, hugs, smiles, and tears...the simple acts of kindness and love that can let us shine the light of God’s love to one another and to the world.