Pastor Alissa Bender

Hamilton Mennonite Church

June 28, 2020

**Welcoming Prophets**

Matthew 10:40-42; Jeremiah 28(:5-9)

Jesus said: “….Those who welcome prophets just because they are prophets will receive the reward reserved for the prophets themselves” (Mt 10:41a IB)

When I picture the group of people hearing this directly from Jesus, I imagine nervousness, although maybe that’s just what I imagine I would feel. At the beginning of chapter 10, we read that Jesus gathered his 12 closest student-followers and gave them the authority to do the miracles that they had been seeing him do. Then Jesus sent them out (without any luggage to speak of) to face their own communities who had previously known them as fishers, tax collector, rebel rouser, and who would now witness them in their new vocation of proclaiming and demonstrating the nearness of the Kingdom of God.

Oh, and by the way, says Jesus, “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them.” They will ask the authorities to deal with you and they will drive you out of respectable places of worship. You will continually be asked to give an accounting for the truth you are proclaiming.

And at the end of what we are given of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples, he adds: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet (in other words, just because they are a prophet) will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person (just because they are) a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-- truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."

Jesus is making his disciples family. In the ancient world, identity is tied to blood and community. When you practice hospitality, you welcome someone into your home, you implicitly welcome their people, whoever sent them. So Jesus says, know that I am sending you, and find strength in that.

The second line was especially interesting to me this week. Again, from the Inclusive Bible translation; “….Those who welcome prophets just because they are prophets will receive the reward reserved for the prophets themselves”.

You might wonder what reward is reserved for prophets. Elsewhere in Matthew, prophets are promised the rewards of persecution (5:12), rejection (13:57), and death (23:30-35, 37), and yet those who are persecuted are also told, "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven" (5:12). And this word “reward” is really in the sense of an inheritance. An unearned gift.

Those who welcome prophets…

These words particularly grabbed me this week because in the lectionary they are paired with Jeremiah 28. We need to hear more of that story than the 5 verses given. This scene between the prophets Jeremiah and Hananiah happens after the Babylonians initially attacked Jerusalem but before the total devastation that was to come in 587 BCE. Judah is hurting, and surely wanting to hear about when YHWH will come to their rescue.

But Jeremiah is not there to provide false comfort. He chastises those would claim "Peace, peace," when there is no peace. Jeremiah is that over-the-top protestor who shows up with an object lesson: an actual yoke that he puts over his shoulders, as if he’s an ox pulling a cart, to say that this is what king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon will yet do to the people of Judah. There are no shortcuts out of this pain. We have to face it.

Then Hananiah comes and says, no, God has told me that God has broken the yoke of the Babylonian oppressors. Within two years the exiles will be back home, everything that has been stolen will be returned, God will liberate us.

But Jeremiah will have none of it. He says, yeah right (or in the Hebrew: Amen!), wouldn’t that be great, if it were true! But I’m here to tell you that it’s not. Verse 9: “As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.” In other words, it’s easy to say there will be peace but until it’s true, what good does that do?

So Hananiah grabs Jeremiah’s protest sign (yoke) and breaks it, and after Jeremiah leaves, he hears from God that breaking those wooden bars will only put iron bars in their place. Not facing the truth of the present struggle will only make it longer and harder to escape.

What a story! And it could be easy, in hindsight, now that we know that the Babylonian oppression did increase and last as Jeremiah said, to make a simple moral point about not listening to false prophets, but the story’s not that simple.

Was Hananiah an opportunistic false prophet, saying what the crowds wanted to hear? It is possible. The message of deliverance is going to be more popular than the message of destruction every time. But God’s prophets have also brought unlikely messages of deliverance to the people of God, messages that came to pass.

Walter Brueggemann points out that Hananiah could be rooted in the theological tradition of Israel, that God is trustworthy and will answer God’s people. Hananiah’s message is much like the prophet Isaiah’s, a century earlier, when he prophesied the astonishing deliverance from the Assyrian threat.

Perhaps Hananiah was not consciously trying to mislead the people, but he was doing the tempting thing of speaking a more palatable message, a message that fit with Judah’s understanding of the world. But as the exiles looked back on this event as they recorded the witness of Jeremiah, it was finally clear to them that Hananiah had not been paying attention to what God was doing in the here and now.

Jeremiah was not saying that God is not faithful and trustworthy, listening to the cries of God’s people, but you need to understand, Jeremiah said, that this is going to be a long road to restoration. Things are going to get worse before they get better. But denying that will only make things harder. It’s in facing the long, hard road that you will find the gifts of God even in this journey.

In chapter 29, Jeremiah encourages the exiles in Babylon to seek the welfare of the city where they are. Build houses, live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce. You are going to need nourishment for the long haul and you are going to need to attach your shalom to the shalom of those you think are nothing like you.

And that’s where we find that well-known word of promise that we love to pull out of the doom and gloom of the rest of Jeremiah: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart” (29:11-13).

So here we are, in the present, at yet another point in history when prophets are calling out to us, saying, “Things are not okay. They haven’t been for a long time and it’s going to take a long time to make them better”.

Just as Jeremiah told Judah that they could not escape the sins of their past and present, we cannot escape the deeply rooted sin of white supremacy in our institutions and society. We must hear the cry of the prophets who are not always reassuring, who are sometimes angry, who are sometimes loud, and who may be holding the truth that will save us in the end. The God of liberation is doing something here and now, and those of us who have benefitted from systems that privilege whiteness may have to get more uncomfortable before all people will be able to be truly free.

It has been a strange feeling for me to be suddenly out of commission for a few weeks as I was recovering from surgery. I have watched the prophets of the world declare Black Lives Matter and wondered how to join the refrain. I have reflected on June being Indigenous History Month and the weight of racism and colonialism that still keep us from genuine reconciliation. Pride month has nearly passed us by and I have been reminded of LGBTQ+ prophets that have called out throughout time and who continue to challenge the Mennonite Church and others to see that we haven’t broken the yoke of oppression yet. As long as we have queer pastors with limited job prospects and articles that get hurtful comments in the Canadian Mennonite, we still have some uncomfortable work to face.

Late this week Michael Theriault, a white Toronto police officer was found guilty of assault in 2016 against Dafonte Miller, a then 19-year old black man. This was just one of the list of charges against Theriault, and his accused brother was found not guilty. Though this is a small victory, many people feel it as a loss, to work so long and hard for such little accountability. And if you want one unflinching description of Dafonte’s assault which took one of his eyes from him, I recommend you read *The Skin We’re In* by Toronto writer Desmond Cole.

On Friday I heard Dafonte’s lawyer express his understanding for people’s disappointment at this limited victory and his admiration for the tenacity of folks he has seen in his 30-year career, folks who are say they’re not going to take it anymore. And he also added: “... this is a situation where you make change in inches not feet or yards.” So, he said, keep pushing. Dafonte also spoke to the media and said: “A lot of my brothers and sisters are going through similar situations as me and a lot of my people are dying and a lot of officers are walking. So I don’t feel like I took a loss – I feel like we took a step forward”.

As I sat at home this month and continually reminded myself that this was a time for resting and recovering, I found strange comfort in what I now find in Jeremiah: This is still going to take a while, like the beginnings already have. No one can do it all in one day. In fact, if you think you can, you’re fooling yourself and making the road even longer for everyone.

Hananiah’s confidence in God’s trustworthiness is also in Jeremiah’s message.

The road is long *and* God is good.

There is a lot to learn *and* God still speaks.

We have to face the prophets’ words head on, *and* God is with us.

“Those who welcome prophets just because they are prophets will receive the reward reserved for the prophets themselves”.

We do not need to fear what we may learn

or be overwhelmed by what we must do

or become defensive about our identities and what we have been part of or benefitted from.

God is bigger than our fears and our actions and our defenses. Jesus has made us, his followers, family. And that’s a great big diverse family. So how will you find new ways to welcome the one who comes to you without much luggage to speak of, but with a message that proclaims the nearness (if also the not-quite-there-ness) of the Kingdom of God? How will we welcome prophets? May God break us open to live these questions.