



The Prophet's Dilemma

March 24, 2021

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From time to time, pastors confide their ministry frustrations – not *your* pastor, of course. Your pastor is very content. *Other* pastors, though, speak of the disconnect between what they want to say and what they feel they can say and keep their jobs. They might witness unfaithful or dangerous or marginalizing behavior in society (or dare I say, in our congregations themselves!) and want to speak out. With the Bible's instruction, they long to point to where we are slipping and lend a hand back onto firm, holy ground.

Speaking out is risky stuff. It can make people mad or defensive. So, pastors sometimes speak obliquely of the lessons taught by Jesus, hoping you'll find yourself in the story without having a finger pointed at you directly. I've found myself in the story many a time, realizing the need for repentance. I've also left worship oblivious to my own faults, wondering in amazement about the offenses committed by other people.

Years ago, I led worship for a church in Sacramento, California, where I'd never been before. I preached on forgiveness. Afterward, a woman accosted me. "Were you talking to *me*?" she demanded to know. "Were you talking to me?" she repeated. "I didn't even want to come to church today, but my friend begged me to come. I'm not even a member here." I waited patiently as she continued, "I haven't talked to my sister in years, and now I know I have to call her. How did you know that I needed to hear this message about forgiveness?" I didn't; the Spirit did. Because I didn't know the circumstances of the people present and had no long-term relationship with them, it was easy to offer a message on a challenging topic and walk away. Our pastors don't have that luxury.

Franciscan priest and author Richard Rohr wrote about the dichotomy of the priest and the prophet. The priest speaks of "religion, communion, love, transcendence, connecting this world with the next, and generally offering a coherent world of meaning." They offer the expectancy of the empty tomb when we're still walking to Jerusalem. It makes us glad for their comforting words.

In contrast, Rohr writes, "The role of the prophet is to lead us on an individual and collective level through the necessary deconstruction of what I would call the false self. The prophet's path is of descent and is never popular or easy. It is about letting go of illusion and toppling false gods." In our world, we create many false gods: the elevation of self over community; acceptance of a wealth gap; tolerance of mass incarceration for profit; fealty to government leaders; self-righteous protest that we'd dare restrict someone from carrying a semi-automatic rifle into their local grocery store; and division based arbitrarily on skin color or ethnicity, to name a few.

Naming those illusions and false gods comes at a cost. I know it doesn't make me popular. If Presbytery Executives had approval ratings, mine would plummet. As Rohr warns, "People usually like priests, which is why they are established and comfortable in almost all cultures, but the prophets are almost always killed."

Time and again, though, we find ourselves returning to the truth of the prophets' message. When we're observant, we see ourselves in the story and repent, turning again to God, the Source of all that is pure and undefiled. How then might we make space for the uncomfortable words of the prophet? Are we able to humble ourselves to receive correction with the same gladness as the gift of the empty tomb? For me, I swallow hard and listen. In our journey toward Jerusalem, may we be prodded and poked by the words of our prophets and may we give thanks and space for their difficult ministry.