

Prophets of Peace

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Jeremiah 28:5-9

28:5 Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD;
28:6 and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.
28:7 But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people.
28:8 The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.
28:9 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."

Matthew 10:40-42

10:40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.
10:41 Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;
10:42 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."

I.

As a little child, I was often exposed to gracious hospitality. Growing up in a missionary family and in the missionary culture of the time, in India, we stayed in guesthouses and with families—and extended the hospitality in turn to others who came through town and stayed with us. Every one we received was called uncle or auntie by us little children. Although... even then we noticed that our parents were more comfortable with some uncles and aunties than others. But the hospitality was offered in either case.

As a teenager, I noticed that my parents were not limited in sharing such hospitality simply with church workers—on a university campus in New England they received visitors and pilgrims, students and scholars from all over the world, and every faith. By offering hospitality –

an almost universal value among people of virtually every faith, I have noticed—they offered a shared place of beginning for a new kind of interfaith community that extended beyond our usual boundaries.

In Matthew's gospel we hear about this kind of hospitality—Jesus offers a word of appreciation for all who receive those who are sent to them, in the name of justice or truth, or the “little ones”. Now, I need to hustle to admit-- scholars these days suggest that in Matthew's gospel, the emphasis is all about receiving the Christian apostles or their official emissaries. They say that the words “righteous person” and “prophet” and even “little ones” were all code words, ways of talking in that Matthew church, a generation and more after Jesus, about the official representatives of the Church—messengers sent out, sent out in a hostile world, and received by the scattered faithful. IF that is the case, then this Matthew passage is simply telling us we need to receive the bishops, the missionaries and the preachers well, when they come to us. Now tempting as I may find that message as a new pastor, that is hardly exciting as a word from God for today...or is it?

However the people in that Matthew church took it, it's an open question what Jesus meant of course—the first time he said such words! What did he mean by the prophet received in a prophet's name? OR the righteous person, or the “little one”? In the Gospel according to Mark we hear words from Jesus that resonate with these in Matthew's, but are also strikingly different—In Mark's version Jesus picks up a child—some have suggested a homeless beggar child—and says: “whoever receives one such little child in my name receives me—and whoever receives me receives not me, but the One who sent me.” (Mark chapter 9). Here Jesus is clear: his disciples need to practice hospitality toward the most vulnerable of street children—and to the degree they receive the child they receive God. Plain and simple.

The problem with the purely churchy reading of Jesus' words as a call to offer hospitality to wandering church workers is that it misses the radical call of Jesus to hospitality for the most vulnerable and least appreciated. And this version may cause us to miss the edge of the sayings too.

“Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.” Now friends, what is a prophet's reward? Sure, this could mean a heavenly reward—but when the bible talks about prophets it often portrays them as people who are rejected because they have spoken a difficult truth. And isn't it the case that those who welcome prophets often suffer the same fate as prophets? Guilt by association. Reward in the long haul, but suffering, rejection and even ridicule in the short haul. There is an edge, a risk, a price to offering hospitality to the traveling messenger from God. The reward of solidarity and the price of solidarity are one and the same: the reward of communion and the price of communion are the same: costly grace. Living in comfortable circumstances we may miss this costliness, or just not get it; what's so hard about receiving visitors? Let me offer a true story by way of example!

I once worshipped in a church in Burma's capital, Rangoon. It was illegal for the church to let a foreigner preach. And worse, I was there with a delegation of the Baptist Peace

Fellowship, a group viewed by the Burmese government with some suspicion. The pastor of the church, a Baptist from the Chin ethnic group, welcomed us any way. “I cannot ask you to preach,” said he—“But please, bring greetings.” Then he paused just in case I had not grasped what he was saying. “Take your time with the greetings.” Being dense I had to ask—“How long is appropriate here for “Greetings”?” He said patiently. “Take as long as you like. This is God’s house and God’s time. I will be offering a sermon as well—I am sorry I cannot ask you to offer the sermon.” I knew all too well that he was the one taking the risk—the risk of the prophet’s reward. He might be having a long visit with military intelligence the next day, as did another young man—who welcomed us at the airport. His church members or family might be at risk. Now I was an American with a tourist visa, protected by a powerful foreign government. No real risk to me—but not so the pastor of the church that allowed the tourist—the prophet of peace-- to speak without permission from the government. I will never forget this hospitality. My greetings that morning were thorough and biblically based. Some might have called it a sermon. It was indeed God’s time, not the government’s.

II.

I remember the first time I met Tom Cornell, the chef at the Waterbury Connecticut Council of Churches, and a Roman Catholic. We met in his Soup Kitchen after hours. He was making cabbage soup for the next day, stirring a huge pot. A middle age guy looking tired. With a New York accent. He pointed to a big tub on the counter—“Open that,” he said. I opened it—a huge tub of beef bouillon. “Smell it,” said he. That’s the same bouillon they use in the fancy French restaurant downtown. We offer the best we have every day here. You see, when someone comes through the doors here, we are never sure. It might be Christ himself, come back, disguised as a homeless man, or dressed as a woman with seven children in tow, or, well anyone! So we offer the best we have, we offer hospitality to each person as though he or she were Christ. “For as much as you do it unto these, you do it unto me.”” I sniffed the beef bouillon. It had a strong smell. And every time I smell soup cooking, I remember those words—and I remember the charge to look for Christ in every neighbor. Thanks Tom. And that was just the first conversation!

When was the last time you had a lovely experience offering hospitality or being received by someone who started out a stranger, and soon became a friend?

It is our experience that when strangers meet in the name of God, and share even a cool glass of water, often we get a taste of blessing that is far bigger than we are. Christ is there in the midst of us, and where Christ is, God is...the One who sent Jesus, and sends us. And while sometimes this is when we meet as fellow travelers with Jesus- often that isn’t explicit or expected. Sometimes it is about receiving some prophet or advocate or pilgrim—even when we are not too sure the message is the same as our own. I have gone on peace pilgrimages following Buddhists beating drums. I have walked in broken neighborhoods with African American Muslims saying “Allah rains on the just and the unjust.” Whom have you received in the name of truth or justice or peace? And who has been willing to make common cause with you?

God today poses to us a worthy and lovely query: who is it God is sending to us now—and how shall we receive them? About this time Saturday morning I took my distinguished visitors, John and Ann Carman, on a tour of the building here at Emmanuel Friedens. First we toured the main floor, the parlor, the offices, the closets, the chapel, and then the sanctuary. The second floor was next: the youth room the offices the offices, the offices. Then we went to the lower level: Sunday school rooms, historical room, closets, more closets, more rooms, a fellowship hall, a kitchen. And I came to a remarkable moment of discovery: sisters and brothers, we have got the *room* to offer a bit of hospitality!

So the question is—who is it God is sending us now, and how shall we receive them?

III.

There are two ways of doing church. The first is to be a community that is made up of those who have always been there. The other is that we be a welcoming community for pilgrims and sojourners of all sorts and varieties. We all carry in our bones the potential to go either way. On the one hand we long for a sense of continuity and tradition and belonging. So it is attractive to strive for permanence and think of ourselves as the institution to be preserved. We want to leave a legacy after all, and we have close friendships with those we have long known.

But we also carry in our spiritual and physical bones the potential to be a community of radical welcome and hospitality. If we are open to the possibility that our new best friend has yet to arrive; if we embrace the notion that God actually sends us people in every shape and variety and background—and it is our calling to receive them; if we long for the blessing which is receiving prophets and advocates of justice and love, and lots of us folk who are too little to be given any such title, but deeply faithful people—lovely people...well then, this potential can come alive. And then we leave a different legacy. A prophet's legacy; a legacy of justice and peace; and, most of all, very real love.

Real hospitality means being open to the possibility that God is bringing us a new word—through some message from a stranger. Because if we go looking for someone that important among us without knowing who it is, we are bound to treat folk well. Real hospitality is a cool cup of water offered to a stranger. Real hospitality is receiving every child of God, every little one—as though she might be Christ himself. However we arrange our life together—we do have room, to receive some children of God. The blessings of these sisters and brothers will be the blessings we receive.