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“The Prophetic Word”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

July 5, 2015

Ezekiel 2:1–5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2–10; Mark 6:1–13

I hope all of you had a wonderful Fourth of July weekend as we celebrate with our nation our hopes that we will live up to the great “proposition” that all men and women are created equal. Enjoy the birthday of our nation, a wonderful opportunity for us to remember our heritage and our hope.

I have three words to share with you: First, a word of gratitude; secondly, a word on sermon titles; and then thirdly, a reflection on the Liturgy of the Word that we just heard.

First, let me express on behalf of Sheila, Juliana, and my entire family a word of thanks to all of you for your words of prayer for us and with us as we celebrated the life and death of my beloved mother of 94 years. I’m grateful. We’re all very grateful for the ways in which this community, my church family, embraced us, supported us, loved us, cared for us during the days of her dying, her death, and burial. We are very, very thankful.

That week of June 26, as I was discussing with Ed Pritchett earlier, contained events full of pain and hope for me because it touched the lives of people and places that I hold very dearly. If you recall the week of June 26, after the massacre of the Emanuel Nine, was a week in which the place of Charleston, where I served for over 20 years in various capacities, was experiencing the anguish of grief. Yet, in the midst of that anguish was a word of hope that emerged from a state long

known for its racial divisions. It was a spark of hope—we will see whether it will last or not—but as we were gathering in Hampton County, SC, 90 miles south of Charleston, for the burial vigil of my mother, the President arrived in Charleston. My family gathered around the television to listen to his incredible sermon on grace that touched the hearts of all. That place, and those people in that city and in my county for a moment were united throughout the whole course of the Low Country, the Pee Dee, the Midlands, and the Upstate. It was a very touching realization that maybe South Carolina can be a model for the nation.

As we buried my mother on the afternoon of June 27, you were here gathered under Marilyn's leadership to bury Ed Kwon, an extraordinary man of faith. I deeply missed being here with you, Delia and Talitha, but know that we join with you in our grief as Talitha buried her father and I buried my mother. I thank you all for your witness and your prayers, your phone calls, your letters. It is an amazing grace we have here at First Presbyterian, a church that deeply embodies the mercy and compassion and the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Thank you.

In reflecting on sermon titles, I came up with *The Prophetic Word* as the one that was to be the name of my homily today. It could have been *The Call of the Prophet*, *The Commission of the Prophet*, *The Voice of the Prophet*, or any number of titles. After I read Marilyn's sermon from last Sunday—a prophetic piece. If you've not read it or heard it, you need to—it's all about *prophetic grief*. I believe her sermon that Sunday should be connected to the letter of our Session sent to the people of Emanuel AME as a way in which we will constantly remind ourselves of the promises we made to them that will be promises we aim to keep. I thank you, Marilyn, for your word, for your care for this community, and I thank you for your care of me.

The Scriptures today are centered on three or four particular words: the first is failure, the second is familiarity and faith, and the last word is weakness. In a reading from Ezekiel, the classic text where Ezekiel is commissioned, entrusted with the Word to speak the truth, he is in exile, and he wants to warn the people back in Israel and in Exile that times are not going to get any better. But they must not give up hope in the assurance that, even though their nation was defeated by the Babylonians, they were not mistaken to put their trust in God. But he reminded

the prophet that these people back home, and even with him in exile, are a rebellious lot. They are hard of heart, obstinate, stubborn, and impudent. These are strong words for the prophet to go about his business, knowing that he is going to meet people who will dismiss him and resist him at every angle. And yet, the message of the prophet is one, not of success, because all that the Lord God wants the prophet to be aware of in his preaching to his people is simply that they know there's been a prophet among them. There is something liberating about being able to preach freely the truth of God and take what comes, and move on if necessary because you're faithful, not necessarily successful in a culture that measures our performance ratings every year in the workplace on various rankings of performance. He would have been a miserable failure, but yet, he was completely faithful in his prophetic work to the people of Israel.

The hardness of heart that Ezekiel experienced is true for Jesus as well. Up until this point of Chapter 6 in Mark, Jesus went about his mission and ministry, preaching the coming kingdom of God and asking for repentance and belief in the Good News. He worked many miracles. He healed the sick. He overcame and overwhelmed the demons. People discovered in him the fear of the Lord. And then he ends up going to his hometown, and there he experienced the phenomenon of familiarity. We always used to joke in strategic planning sessions that you can't facilitate the conversation about your future together unless you bring in somebody from at least 50 miles away with a briefcase, an expert. Jesus walked into his hometown, and immediately the people saw him as a familiar member of their community, and they simply dismissed him and took offense at him, even though they knew who he was. "Where did he get all this, this puffed up sense of power and pride and wisdom and deeds of power?" "Isn't he the son of the carpenter, the son of Mary?" And Jesus then realized that he couldn't display any of the power of God's kingdom in their midst because of their unbelief. Faith is the basis, the context in the way in which he displayed the power of God in their midst. So he was discouraged and amazed and disheartened at their unbelief. He refused to be for them a magician, working signs and symbols without faith. He refused to be for them a court jester who made them laugh and rally around one of their own. He was a true prophet of God.

Finally, we listened to the story of Paul trying to convince the people of Corinth

that he was worthy of their trust, that his authority was something that they needed to listen to. He was well aware of the cost that he was willing to pay for his discipleship. He talked about a thorn in his side and went on to say that “the Lord explained my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore,” he says, “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

How do we, in our weakness, listen to the prophetic voice? How do we, as a nation, struggle with all the issues of compassion and mercy for the immigrant, for those who are under or uninsured, for those struggling for justice and racial reconciliation? How do we, as a church, deal with the decisions of our Supreme Court in welcoming across our city and nation those who wish to live married life in unions that are gay? How do we as a people accept prophetic grieving and enter into a prayer deeply felt for racial reconciliation in a nation marked with pockets of rage and sin? May grace prevail.

God asks us in the Scriptures today to learn from our experiences of life on how to be open to his Word about the power of his kingdom. Let the words that capture the themes of our readings resonate with you this weekend. Failure is not the end, but fidelity. Hardness of heart and familiarity should not lead to a people who are discouraged and disheartened because we are a believing community. Finally, I hope we can all claim that in our weakness as a nation, as a community of faith, as a city, that God’s grace is sufficient, for in our weakness, we will be truly strong. Failure, Familiarity, Faith and Weakness: great themes. These are great themes of faith we share.

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