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“Blazing Prophets”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

August 18, 2013

Jeremiah 38:4–6, 8–10; Psalm 80; Luke 12:49–56

Gracious God, send forth Your bountiful spirit upon us, that we might hear Your Word and bless those to be ordained and installed as deacons and elders of the church this day. Amen.

When I was a young man, as a theological student in Rome, several of my classmates and I formed a study group around Paul’s Letter to the Romans. We used as our basic exegetical text a work by the great scholar from the Biblicum, Stanislas Lyonnet, S.J. Each one of us was then given the choice to read and contribute to the discussion from a classic commentary of that great letter to the Romans. As you know, Romans was not only powerfully influential within the Christian tradition, but one of the most important documents for Western civilization.

The text I chose to read was Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans*. It changed me. It wasn’t because, and I must admit this, I understood everything he had to say, especially since he was such a great systematic theologian and his commentary was, at times, dense, but I did understand that what I was hearing, through the commentary, was God’s Word. What I heard, not simply read, but what I heard was that I was subject to that Word, that I was under the authority of that Word, that I stood under that Word not over it, that it wasn’t I who judged the meaning of the Word, but the Word that judged me.

This past Monday, Marilyn, as head of our staff, facilitated a wonderful conversation with testimonials from all the elder and deacon candidates about the meaning of the office with which they are about to be entrusted. What she did was to walk through each of the constitutional questions that I will address to the candidates in short order. Two of them she lingered over: 1.) Do you accept the Scripture, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the universal church as God's Word? 2.) Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ under the authority of Scripture?

She used as an example Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a faithful witness who was willing to accept the consequences of his bearing the meaning of that Word in Nazi Germany. I think it had the same effect on her as Barth's commentary on Romans had on me. It was the power and awe of God's Word among us that I picked up from the reading of that letter. It was the presence of that all-powerful Word in my life that allowed me to understand this distinctive feature of the Reformed tradition: the place and the power of the Word in our lives.

It is appropriate then, on this day in which we install, commission, and ordain candidates for the Diaconate and Ruling Elders, to hear a Word from two great prophets: Jeremiah and Jesus. It is a reminder to all of us that we were baptized into that prophetic tradition. Priest, King, Prophet: all chapters in the great *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin. All of us by virtue of our baptism are part of that prophetic tradition, and I don't mean in the conventional way that we now have the ability to foretell or predict the future, but it's that gift given to the church to be able to read the signs of the times, all the current realities of suffering that we face, all the divisions and factions and difficulties... all through the perspective of God's Word.

Jeremiah was a reluctant prophet, as I'm sure some of our officers were. Some expressed just that at the Session testimonial evening. A reluctant prophet at a very young age, God had selected him in the womb. He knew it, and God said to him, "I command you; I want you to be a prophet to the nations." Jeremiah said, "Not me. I'm an introvert. I can't speak publicly. I'm not the right man for the job." God

says to him, “Do not be afraid for I am with you. I’ll deliver you.” So Jeremiah accepts God’s ability to put words in his mouth, and he accepts the challenge even though he knows God says, “People will fight against you. But don’t worry. I am with you, and they will not prevail.”

Jump to one of the many times in which Jeremiah speaks faithfully the Word to the King and to the officials, and where did it lead him: to the bottom of the muddy cistern. The context is very simple: Jeremiah was trying to tell the King that “when the Babylonians arrived at the gates of Jerusalem, they are going to overcome you. So let them go, let them occupy the city. It is the will of the Lord.” And yet those who heard the recommendation and the word of the prophet said, “This man ought to be put to death for saying traitorous words. He is discouraging the soldiers in their fight against the king of Babylon. Therefore, O King, hand him over to us. This prophet needs to be put aside. He is discouraging one and all.” So they dropped him into the cistern in the mud, hoping he would disappear from the scene. It was the Ethiopian a little later who drew him back out because of the wickedness of those officials, and he was able to preach God’s Word another day.

That’s not the end of it though, and this is important to note: Jeremiah was a great lamenter. He didn’t take kindly to the fact that when God said they would fight against you and I would deliver you, he would end up in the mud of punishments, threats and disdain for his actions. In the famous chapter in 20, he said, “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me... Cursed be the day on which I was born!” (Jeremiah 20:7, 14) And yet, despite the consequences he experienced from his faithful preaching and prophesying the Word of the Lord, despite the pain and suffering he experienced and the anger he felt about being seduced as a prophet into doing the will of the Lord, he stood tall and firm for being a faithful witness.

In the Gospel, I’m sure you were startled by the language of Jesus. It’s appropriate to note that Jesus didn’t come among us as a peace monger, peace at all costs. He came with a sense of fire, a blazing prophet he and Jeremiah were. He came to generate as much heat as light, and despite the harshness of the language, it

reminds us that the Word of the Lord that he preached was a two-edged sword. It cut one from the other, those who were hearing it and those who refused to hear it, even within the family, a Word that challenges all of us quick to the heart.

As our candidates come forward and approach this Table of Word and Sacrament, it is my hope that this congregation will become with them and for them a place where they become a part of a community of prophets, where the Word of the Lord, in these days and times, will be on their lips where they're willing to challenge us with sometimes an unpopular word and challenge the Durham community at large.

We have a tendency to kill our prophets. We celebrate this month the 50th anniversary of the great speech by Martin Luther King, Jr., and we remember all those bloody and difficult days in Alabama and elsewhere that led to the creation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. We remember how Dr. King was murdered and how he has become an icon among Christians, and even within our American society, as a faithful witness to the Gospel. There are others in our day and time that are a part of the prophetic witness and tradition, and I encourage our officers and all of you who are baptized in that tradition to be faithful witnesses to the Lord because all of us have been called to live out the prophetic vocation.

The message of Jesus and Jeremiah in their day and our day is not simply one of hopelessness in the face of great difficulty. The message they received, on the contrary, is a message of redemption, of redemptive grace, and of the divine vindication of all the faithful in their witness to God among us. Rejoice with me as we congratulate the candidates coming forward shortly to be received, ordained, and installed as members of the prophetic community of faith to which we all belong.

Influences:

Karl Barth

Bob Duggan

Frank Matera

Michael B. Dick