

May 28, 2023

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

Gadflies of God

Isaiah 30:9 ff

“(My people) are a rebellious people.

My children can be faithless.

Ones who will not hear the Lord’s instruction.

Who say to the seers, ‘Do not see.’

Who say to the prophets,

‘Don’t tell us what is right,

tell us what is nice - what is smooth.

Prophecy illusions (not truth).

Leave the righteous path.

Turn aside from the sacred way.

Let us hear no more about The Holy One of Israel.’”

Luke 4:24, 28-30

“And (Jesus) said to them, ‘Truly I tell you,

no prophet is accepted in the prophets hometown.’

...And when they heard this, the congregation was

filled with rage and led (Jesus) to a cliff to throw him off.

But he passed through the mob and went on his way.”

Between Mothers Day and Fathers Day there is a season.
One we New Englanders do not look forward to:
“Blackfly” season.

Blackflies are nasty creatures.

When I think about the ten plagues upon Egypt,
I imagine one of them to be blackflies!

Worse than mosquitoes
blackflies bite without warning.

You only know their sting after it’s too late
and they’ve already left their calling card:
those itchy welts!

How does something so small leave something so big?

Repellent for blackflies is the stuff of folk-lore.

The chemical called “Deet” seems to work
but with it come contamination fears.

Musk oil or some other stinky stuff
comes recommended by loggers and hikers I know.

Naturalists recommend remedies such as
vanilla extract, lavender or pine extract.

But leave it to the Farmer’s Almanac
to offer the most down-to-earth advice:

“Wear long sleeves and long pants.”

In other words, “Learn to LIVE WITH IT!”

My sermon this morning isn't about blackflies,
it's about gadflies.

In the dictionary, a gadfly has come to mean
“an annoying person
who provokes others into action using criticism.”
And, in our biblical heritage, the gadflies of God
were the prophets.

It was their job to bug people.
And not just any people, but the people of God.
People in authority, people with wealth and power,
higher-up people who controlled lower-down people,
religiously, financially, militarily, socially.

Some Christians think politics and religion don't mix,
but clearly, they don't know about the prophets.
The prophets were constantly criticizing
the political life of Israel.
No war went un-criticized, no king went un-criticized,
no foreign policy went un-criticized.

But sometimes the object of criticism
were the spiritual values of regular people.
If the people were getting too greedy, too materialistic,
too comfortable, too self-centered,
while ignoring the poor, not hospitable to strangers,

then prophets swarmed in - leaving spiritual welts - far more biting than skin-deep.

Said the prophet Isaiah:

“Draw near all nations. For the Lord is enraged against all governments. Furious against their hoarding (and warring). The Lord has a sword that will be sated with blood.”

Said the prophet Jeremiah:

“When will you stop lusting after false gods? Israel is like a thief who feels shame only when they get caught. Their officials, their priests, are all alike...”

Said the prophet Hosea:

“Hear the word of the Lord, you Israelites... There is no faithfulness, no love...in the land. Only cursing, lying, murder, stealing, adultery. They defy all boundaries...”

And yet, with all this “in-your-face” gadfly criticism, Israel was amazingly hospitable to the prophets.

Like the advice of The Farmer’s Almanac”

“They learned to LIVE WITH IT.”

Yeh! more than that, they called it “holy”.

The largest segment the Hebrew bible is dedicated to “The Prophets”.

More than Torah, more than Psalms,
more than the history of King David or Solomon,
the prophets occupy the greatest chunk.
There are 12 major prophets and 12 minor ones.
Biggies like Isaiah and Jeremiah
to the little ones like Habakuk, Obadiah and Micah.

So much did they celebrate the prophets,
they awarded what they said with the phrase:

“Thus saith the Lord.”

Now, when I start sounding high and mighty,
Esther simply says, “Stop sounding like you’re God!”
But when the prophets spoke to Israel that way
they believed, *“Thus saith the Lord.”*

The ancient Israelites knew God loved them.
But they also knew it wasn’t with a pampering love.
It was a love that included holy criticism
not because they liked it - but because they knew
it helped save them FROM THEMSELVES!
They believed the change The Prophets demanded
was for their own good.

And this is precisely why
Jesus considered himself to be God’s prophet.
A large part of his ministry was holy criticism,
not for its own sake but for the sake of Salvation.

When he said to the chief priest, the scribes and the Pharisees: *“Woe to you...you hypocrites...you make religion so difficult you lock people out of the kingdom of God. You make faith all about gold and piety but you ignore justice and mercy to those who need it.”* Jesus was being a prophet.

When he said, *“You snakes. You brood of vipers...I send you prophets and wise thinkers and you flog and crucify them...”* Jesus was being a prophet.

And when Luke tells this story about Jesus,
*‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in their hometown.’
...And when they heard this, the congregation was filled with rage and led (Jesus) to a cliff to throw him off. But he passed through the mob and went on his way.’*

He was reminding them the role of a prophet
- those gadflies of God - was necessary.
They needed to accept, listen and change
holy criticism.

And so the simple question to us is this:

“How are we with The Prophetic?

How well do you accept social & spiritual criticism?

It seems to me

America is losing its sense of holy criticism.

As a nation and as individuals,

we find it hard to accept God's prophets.

Modern Christians seems more like those people described by the prophet Isaiah 2,700 years ago.

(My people) are a rebellious people. My children can be faithless.

Ones who will not hear the Lord's instruction.

Who say to the seers, 'Do not see.' Who say to the prophets,

'Don't tell us what is right, tell us what is nice - what is smooth.

Prophecy illusions (not truth). Leave the righteous path.

Turn aside from the sacred way.

Let us hear no more about The Holy One of Israel.'"

Look on the national scene.

Certain states are trying to re-write history & ban books.

Literature that disparages, demeans

or makes certain people feel guilty about their sin.

Just last week a group of mothers in Florida

wanted to ban 13 yr. old Amanda Gorman's poem

"The Hill We Climb" because it condemned hatred and injustice.

Amanda Gorman sounds just like one of God's prophets.

Then there's certain national leaders, who can't stand to be criticized.

Who lie, lie, lie about flaws,

and deny, deny, deny any sin.

They would choke before they confessed.

Then there's the trend in parenting
that believes no child should be criticized.
Never mind that nature criticizes us constantly.
Never mind that fate & accidents criticize us constantly,
parents want their children to know
nothing but nice-ness and smoothness.

Friends, criticism is a part of the real world
and it is our job to raise our children to succeed
in the real world.

And then there's Memorial Day.
This week-end our patriotism goes on full display.
But which brand of patriotism?
The kind that shouts, **"Don't criticize the nation you love."**
Or the one that believes
as the ancient prophets believed
"Prophetic criticism is HOW God loves us".

Since we started worship celebrating our Sunday Schoolers,
let me end with this cute story.

One Sunday School teacher asked a little boy,
"What's a prophet?"
And he quickly responded,
**"It's the money left over
when all the expenses are paid."**

Clearly, we all need more educating
about the biblical prophets and their crucial purpose.
They enabled the people of God to stay faithful.

But the little boy's confusion can be helpful.
The prophetic is meant to help us profit?
Criticism can be holy and helpful
when it sharpens the Christian consciences,
define God's boundaries
speak truth to power,
and makes this world of ours a more faithful place.

We live in season in need of gadflies.
For these are woeful times of greed, lust and power
when people opt for nice and smooth and what we want,
instead of what the world needs of God's love & justice.

We need God's prophets to help save us from ourselves.

Amen.

Prayer of Pastoral Care Pentecost, May 28, 2023 Memorial Day
In Psalm 104 says, *“I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
... Bless the LORD, O my soul. Praise the LORD!”*

With joy for the gift of the Holy Spirit, together, let us pray
for the well-being of the church, the world, and all in need,
saying, God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We thank you for the wonder that erupted on the day of
Pentecost, for the birth of the church, and for all the
witnesses whose lives have been altered by your power
alive in our world. On this Sunday, we thank you for the
children and youth amongst us, for their parents and their
teachers, and for their promise for our shared future.
God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We thank you for the many peoples of this earth whose
visions differ, whose languages offer special insights, and
whose ways of worship and compassion feed our own.
We thank you for the earth itself, through whose creatures
we see your love, and in whose winds, we remember the
coming of the Spirit.
God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

O God, make us hungry, to protect the health and nurture of
all people; let your fire burn in the leaders of the nations,
in governors and mayors, on city and town councils and
school boards. Guard the lives of peacemakers, of soldiers,
of great thinkers and artists. May the skills and passion of
all your people be for the sake of our delight and the
nourishment and welfare of others.
God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

In memory of our own nation's civil war and many sacrifices since, we honor those who have served our country in peacetime and in war. May the day come when nation will not rise against nation, and peoples will not choose arms as their way of working through conflicts, and achieving the common good.
 God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Hear our prayers for those on this church's prayer list. ...

Knowing it is your Holy Spirit who has flowed through your witness of ages past, we give you thanks for the many who have gone before us. With them, we commend all for whom we lift up our voices, trusting that you give more than we need. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

HYMN # 245 Like the Murmur of the Dove's Song

OFFERING With thanksgiving for God's gifts to us, let us offer ourselves and the fruits of our labor for God's work in the world.

***DOXOLOGY**

***PRAYER** Almighty God, receive the gifts we bring in gratitude for your care for us. May we bless you with the dedication of our lives; through Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

CLOSING HYMN # 720 O Beautiful for Spacious Skies

