
Sermon
The Priesthood and Prophethood of All Believers

The Rev. Jack D. Bryant
Hope Unitarian Church
March 14, 2010

First Reading: Adams, James Luther. *The Prophethood of All Believers*, p. 99.

One of the more vivid recollections of my youth in a fundamentalist group is the memory of their eager interest in the prophecies of the Bible. These prophecies were believed to encompass almost the entire range of human history. One all-embracing “prophetic” image that looms in my mind is that of an immense chart that adorned the wall of the church auditorium.

This chart depicted the pivotal events of creation and redemption, beginning with the original chaos and proceeding through the six days of creation, the first day of rest, the fall, the various dispensations of Old Testament history on down to the annunciation, the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection and thence on to the Second Coming of Christ, the Battle of Armageddon, the seven years of tribulation, the thousand-year reign of Christ, the chaining of Satan in hell, the last judgment before the great white throne, and the eternal peace and unquiet of the respective final destinations of all human souls. In short, the epochs of “salvation history” were set forth as “by prophet bards foretold.”

Religious liberals are accustomed to emphasize the prophetic task of the church. But we have long ago abandoned the whole idea of predicting the future by means of interpreting the biblical prophecies. In conformity with the findings of modern historical research, we have held that prediction is a secondary and even an unimportant aspect of Old Testament prophecy. Accordingly, we say that the prophets were primarily forthtellers and not foretellers; they proclaimed the action of God in history; they disclosed the meaning of history. We see the prophet as one who stands at the edge of a community’s experience and tradition, under the Great Taskmaster’s eye, viewing human life from a piercing perspective and bringing an imperative sense of the perennial and inescapable struggle of good against evil, of justice against injustice. In the name of the Holy One the prophet shakes us out of our pride and calls for a change of heart and mind and action. With fear and trembling the prophet announces crisis and demands ethical decision here and now.

Second Reading: James Luther Adams. “Our responsibility in society” (1953) [contained in *The prophethood of All Believers*, George K. Beach, ed. (Beacon: Boston 1987) p 157].

The churches of the left wing of the Reformation held that the churches of the right wing had effected only half a reformation. ... They demanded a church in which every member, under the power of the Spirit, would have the privilege and the responsibility of interpreting the Gospel and also of assisting to determine the policy of

the church. The new church was to make way for a radical laicism - that is, for the priesthood and the prophethood of all believers."

"Radical Laicism" (1984) [ibid; p 93], he writes

"In the present discussion I want to stress the vocation of the laity, assuming according to tradition that everyone is a layperson, an idea expressed in the phrase "the priesthood of all believers."

Sermon

James Luther Adams is considered the most important Unitarian theologian of the 20th century. That in itself is unusual because our movement has not produced many theologians. Most of our memorable leaders have been preachers who were not unconcerned with theology as an academic tradition, but more concerned with the practical reality of what the church should be doing from day to day. I think that tendency influences Adams who was important to academic theology in significant ways – he was the original translator of Paul Tillich from German into English – but whose academic writings on theology have a practical feel to them. I hear that especially in his oft repeated demand that the liberal religious tradition demands a priesthood and a prophethood of all believers. I say it has a practical feel because I believe the priesthood and prophethood of all believers is, by implication, a demand that responsibility and authority not be separated. Most people are eager to have authority. Not as many want to be responsible.

The priesthood of all believers was one of the guiding principles of the Reformation. The established tradition of the church said you needed priests – people who had special dispensation to understand the nature of the divine. The reformers insisted everybody had the innate ability to do so. Everybody could do what the priests could do, hence the term priesthood of all believers – although I think it makes more linguistic sense to say, as Adams does, that everybody is a member of the laity. That's why I am not a priest. I am a minister and the ordination to the ministry in our tradition does not mean the person ordained has the special powers of a priest, but special responsibilities. It is why the stole in our tradition – which is a mark of ordination – is considered a metaphorical yoke that suggests the taking on of obligations and responsibilities.

The idea of the priesthood of all believers is not just an academic or historical oddity. It has practical implications for our society as a whole. When Horace Mann began the public school movement in the 1830's he wanted each school day to begin with a bible reading because he considered biblical literacy to be an important part of cultural literacy. But he did not intend it as religious indoctrination. To that end he specified there would be no prayer or interpretation offered. He just wanted children to hear a reading of the words. Because he believed in the priesthood of all believers the children did not need anyone to tell them what the words meant – or didn't mean. This caused an angry response from the Catholic church. Its leaders did not want Catholic children exposed to the bible without a priest present to tell them what it meant. One Catholic bishop compared Mann's plan of allowing children to have access to the bible without a priest present to giving the children poison. The same attitude is present

today with those who want the religious doctrine of creationism taught in public schools or to eliminate references to Thomas Jefferson in textbooks. They don't believe children should be allowed to read or hear anything without their version of a priest – secular or religious – to tell them what it means.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is one of the foundational ideas of liberal religion. Let me translate into plain English. It is the idea that when it comes to matters religious each and every person is capable of thinking for himself or herself, each and every person has the right to think for himself or herself. It is an idea that is essential to democracy and it is the basis for our tradition of the free pulpit and the free pew. I have no right to preach any particular doctrine or idea. I have the obligation to preach the truth – in love – as best I know it. You have no right to require me to preach any particular doctrine or idea and no obligation to agree with what I say. Each of us is obliged to respect the rights of the other and to engage in civil discourse. In many ways the free pulpit and free pew within the church is a call for the kind of civility that the nascent Coffee Party Movement claims as one of its principles for political discourse.

But having the right to think for yourself is only part of the equation. A corruption of that idea is the notion that a member of this church can believe whatever he or she wants. A corruption of that idea is the notion that no one can tell you what to do. That is to confuse the priesthood of all believers and the free pulpit and free pew with an arrested adolescence, with an attitude not of freedom, but of immaturity, the idea of authority without responsibility. If you are able to think for yourself it follows that you must – you must – assume responsibility for what you think, for what you believe, and for what you do. You cannot separate the two ideas.

Not everybody would agree with what I've said. Some people believe in separating responsibility from authority. This week I've read several articles about the demise of Lehman Brothers. They believed they had the authority to gamble with other people's money – and I don't mean "invest" the money of others, I mean "gamble" with the money of others. When their wagers did poorly they doctored their books to conceal fifty billion dollars in losses. It was massive financial fraud. They wanted the authority to gamble with the money of others, but did not believe they should be responsible for the consequences if their bets did not go well.

And how about Glenn Beck? A few days ago he announced that churches that talk about social justice are using code words for communism and fascism. He said anyone who hears talk of social justice in a church should run for the hills and report that church to denominational authorities. It is a strange world Mr. Beck lives in. It is a world in which the Hebrew Prophets, Jesus of Nazareth, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Lech Walsea are communists and fascists while Stalin and Hitler – famous opponents of social justice – are apparently champions of democracy and people to be admired. Mr. Beck apparently believes people shouldn't think for themselves, they need a priest – the kinds of priests who have supported tyrants in every age – to tell the people what to think and believe.

And this is where it gets interesting. The Hebrew prophets, Mahatma Gandhi, Jesus of Nazareth, Martin Luther King and Lech Walesa were all people who thought for themselves. They were people who took responsibility for what they believed and said.

And because of that they recognized they had the responsibility to speak out when they saw injustice. They saw the need to be prophets.

The true meaning of prophecy is not to predict the future. That's the business of fortune tellers. It's the business of tyrants who want people to be concerned with tomorrow instead of today. When people have the right to think for themselves, to interpret the divine, it follows that they have not only the authority, but the responsibility to look around and examine the nature of the world and see how it compares with the way the world ought to be. That's why the Hebrew Prophets and Jesus and all those others were not in the business of drawing charts and diagrams about future battles and Armageddon. They were in the business of confronting the Lehmen Brothers of their days. It is why the prophet Amos said,

Seek good and not evil,
that you may live;
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,
just as you have said.
Hate evil and love good,
and establish justice in the gate;

The phrase, "establish justice in the gate" is an explicit reference to social justice, a demand that the court system of the day provide justice to those injured by corrupt business practices. And consider these words by the Prophet Micah,

He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.

These are obvious examples of communism and fascism in the bible.

The business of prophecy is to stand before power and speak the truth. It is the business of prophecy that took my colleague, Marvin Lavanahar, to Uganda where he spoke out against proposed laws intended to create the genocide of gays and lesbians. It was the business of prophecy that forty-five years ago caused people to march across a bridge in Selma, Alabama. It is the business of prophecy today for each and every one of us to stand up and declare that we will not be silent in the face of evil. It is the business of prophecy today to declare that a system that leaves millions without healthcare – especially children and pregnant mothers – is wrong – just plain wrong. We may disagree on how best to fix it, but I believe we should stand together and say the present system is broken.

Prophecy – genuine prophecy – standing up and proclaiming the misuse of power in society – demanding justice for all – is the obligation of freedom. It is the obligation of each and every person in a society that proclaims each person has the right to interpret the divine, to measure the way the world is against the way the world ought to be. And it is then the obligation of each person to be responsible. That is why prophecy fails if all it does is tear down.

It is not enough to expose corruption and wrong doing. It is not enough to demand corrupt institutions be torn down. That is the path of anarchy. That is the path

that betrayed the noble aims of the French Revolution. Genuine prophecy demands not only that we identify what is wrong with society, but that we be in the forefront of the creative process required, in the words of a prophet, to create justice in the gates. It demands that members of a free church be actively involved in the church. It demands that members of a free society be actively involved in civic affairs.

It is not enough to throw stones at wrong doers. That is the equivalent of demonstrators who believe free speech is the right to shout down those with whom they disagree. To be free, to truly have a priesthood and prophethood of all believers, it is not enough to recognize the rights that go with those ideas. One must also embrace the responsibilities. It is the right to believe as your conscience demands and the responsibility to engage in civil discourse with those who disagree with you and to defend their right to believe as they do. It is the right to speak out against injustice and the responsibility to know that your freedom of speech does not abridge the right of others to speak; it is the right to speak against wrongdoing and injustice and corrupt institutions and the responsibility to be a constructive agent for change, to be a builder of justice, a builder of institutions that will make justice for all a reality and not a slogan. It is why being against racism or homophobia is insufficient. It is necessary that we be for something, that we be for a society that judges people not by the color of their skin, their ethnic background, their gender, their sexual orientation or a hundred other factors – that we be for a society that judges people by the content of their character.

It is easier to tear down than to build up. It is easier to seize upon a right and ignore the responsibilities that go with it. But rights without responsibilities are immature and incomplete. The priesthood and prophethood of all believers demands a mature religion, one that calls for each person to embrace rights and responsibilities.

Amen.