

"A STRANGE LOVE SONG"
Isaiah 5:1-30
August 18, 2019
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

My friend, Eric Bishop, is a member of the LaVerne congregation in California, and he recently preached a sermon entitled, "Being Black and Brethren." This is what he said.

What's been difficult is having my church be silent when I am at war with society. The consistent injustices occurring against Black and Brown people are not solely individual cases that don't impact us as a faith community. These injustices are about the destruction of humanity. Similarly, my being Black or being Brethren aren't separate issues. I cannot undo my Blackness. It is how I was born. It is how I identify myself and will always be how society identifies me on first approach. And whether I have an official affiliation with the church or not, I cannot undo my Brethrenness. I believe in peace and I believe in justice. They are synonymous to me. I have always thought of us not only as a peace church but as a justice church.

I can neither hide my Blackness or my Brethrenness. When given the chance, my love for humanity in all of its forms, my love of peace and my love of justice exude. This congregation reminds me that I can walk into any space and make myself welcome. I wish that were true. But there is a constant reminder for us Black Americans and persons of color that we live in a country built by us, but not for us. The very laws and proclamations that should protect us are either used against us or ignored when it comes to working for us. When we exercise our free speech rights, we are told to shut up and dribble and to stand and be patriotic. When we speak truth to power, targets are put on our backs and heads.

Being Black and Brethren means that in this struggle I am segregated from my true self because the Brethren half does not know how to engage. My resolve to be part of a peace church, a justice church, a church that has stood on the right side of history, is met with emptiness. Not because I think the Church, my Church, does not want to engage. It is scared. It is unaware of how to engage. The Whiteness of my Church manifests paralysis in the face of social conflicts that require an engagement or understanding of its very neighbors whom it ignores.

Eric quoted James Baldwin from his essay, "The Negro in American Culture." "*To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all*

the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you.

Part of the rage is this: it isn't only what is happening to you, but it's what's happening all the time, in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference and ignorance of most white people in this country.'

Eric responds: *"To say that Mr. Baldwin penned that in 1961 and that it stands just as true, if not more so today, is incredible, scary, and frustrating. In the midst of all that is going on with the social justice struggle of Black people specifically, and people of color in general, is to be in rage, and disbelief, and frustration. Whether it is the deaths of (innocent black men and women at the hands of police officers), or the treatment of our poorest in Flint, Michigan, or the dehumanization of brown immigrants and members of Congress, and to have my Church, a church rooted in peace and justice to say nothing, is but to be in rage.*

Where is our voice? Where is our systemic call for justice? Being Black and Brethren is not a choice. Each is rooted in my entire being and they cannot be segregated. And because of that, there is an internal conflict- which do I serve it I cannot serve both?

We are reminded in scripture 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are the children of God.' May the Church of the Brethren remember its place as the children of God."

I know that Eric would not call himself a prophet, in fact, when I asked his permission to quote from his sermon and told him I was going to call him a prophet he said, "Hardly." But he is. And his is a prophetic voice that the Church of the Brethren needs to hear right now. He stands in a long and distinguished line with men and women, who for centuries, have spoken God's truth to God's people, whether they wanted to hear it or not.

We have spent the summer hearing the words of God's judgment, condemnation, comfort, and hope from the Old Testament prophets: Elijah, Elisha, Amos, Hosea, and now Isaiah. They spoke to God's people at different times, in different circumstances, and in different locations but the one thing they all had in common was a call to social justice.

There is no ignoring that call in scripture. From the very beginning of the Bible to the very end God not only calls God's people to treat others with justice, God demands it. The demands come from the prophets and then from Jesus himself. It couldn't be any clearer. I cannot understand how Christians can argue about that

point. I cannot understand how Christians can deny that we are called to take care of people we know and people we don't, in God's name.

I find the words of the prophets to be quite relevant today- and it breaks my heart. I often think of the people in scripture as being hard-headed and hard-hearted; people who just can't quite get it together and continue to trample upon their relationship with God. I wondered how they could have so blatantly ignored God's call for justice - over and over again. But how are we any different? In our time, 2019, we not only have the Scriptures but we also have centuries of history; we have the words and actions of modern day prophets who changed the world; we have science and technology that boggles the mind. And yet, we still respond to God's call like the people of Israel and Judah from centuries ago and we close our ears.

The prophet Isaiah carried out his ministry for over 55 years in a time of considerable political and religious turmoil. There were wars and rumors of wars; corrupt religious and political leaders; and rampant greed and elitism among the wealthy. Like the prophets before and after him, Isaiah preached four powerful themes: a call for social justice, judgment on the corrupt, a call to pure worship of God, and a word of hope.

First and foremost is the call to social justice. Isaiah understood that all political success or failure was directly related to the moral condition of the society. The present crisis of God's people was directly attributed to the injustice they perpetrated on the weak and vulnerable. The first four chapters of Isaiah describe how bad things are and why the prophet has been called to speak God's word. In chapter one God says, *"There is nothing healthy in you. You are a gang of thugs, a sinful nation. Your heart is completely diseased. I have had enough of your useless offerings and festivals of injustice."* And perhaps the worst of all, *"I despise you with all my soul."* This is God speaking to the people God has chosen, the people God brought out of slavery and led into a new life in the Promised Land. This is God speaking to the people God loved so much. What happened? How did things get so bad?

In chapter five Isaiah tells a parable about a farmer and a vineyard. The farmer did everything possible to provide for a good crop of grapes. The land was fertile. The weather was perfect. Every rock and briar was removed with back-breaking labor. The farmer built a hedge for protection from wild animals and a winepress in preparation for a bumper crop. Everything needed was provided. All of the hard work was done with love. But when the farmer went to harvest an abundant crop of delectable, plump, sweet grapes, what he found was a rotten, sour mess. The

Hebrew word for the rotten grapes means "stinkers" and is the same word used later in Isaiah for "decayed fish."

What a heartbreaking loss for the farmer. And he asks, "What else could I have done? I did everything I possibly could to make this vineyard prosper and I have nothing to show for it." He promises to take away his protection of the land and turn it over to the wild animals to be trampled and grazed. The thorns and briars will once again flourish. And it will never see rain again. And then, the people realized that the farmer in this little "love song" was none other than their God. Isaiah tells them that they are the rotten vineyard and that God planted them for justice but they grew bloodshed; God prepared them for righteousness and found instead cries of suffering.

The rest of chapter five is a recitation of God's judgment and in verse 13 God says this is why you will be conquered by your enemy- because you don't take care of each other. They aren't punished because they worshiped idols or because they didn't go to church enough or because they didn't read the Bible.

They were punished because they didn't care for the orphans and the widows; they didn't welcome the stranger. God is angry because good was given and evil was returned. God is generous and the people are ungrateful. God gives love and they show contempt. Their failure to embody justice invites catastrophe. They were given the best of everything and made very poor choices and so the vineyard will cease to exist.

Their special place as God's people was not only a privilege to be enjoyed, but a responsibility to be performed. God's promise: "I will be your God and you will be my people" brings with it an obligation to remain in covenant relationship with God and with each other. And that relationship calls for justice. Isaiah suggests that the single most important reason God created a relationship with the people was to build a just society. The bountiful and delicious harvest the farmer God worked and hoped for was a society where all are cared for, where all have enough, where all have what they need to live whole and peaceful lives.

The good news is that the prophet Isaiah didn't just speak of rotten grapes and doom and gloom- later, in chapter 27 we read this: *"On that Day I will sing of a delightful vineyard! I, God, am its keeper. I will water it continually. I guard it night and day so that no harm may come to it. So let my vineyard cling to me for protection, and let them make peace with me. In the days to come the children of Leah and Rachel and Jacob will take root and Israel will grow and blossom and fill all the earth with fruit."* (27:2-6)

Though the prophets spoke God's words condemnation and judgment there were always words of hope. Always. No matter how far the people strayed from their God, God never totally abandoned them.

Knowing all of this, why do we act like we are the children of a lesser god, one that doesn't expect much of anything from us. Why do we act like God's prophets don't have a word to say to us today- in this place and in this time?

If we, like Isaiah, understand that the success or failure of a society is directly related to the moral condition of that society. And if our present crisis is directly attributed to the injustice our nation perpetrates on the weak and vulnerable -- then we are in big trouble.

In these troubling times, Sister Joan Chittister calls us to prophetic spirituality which is about living out our faith on the streets of the world, rather than just talking about it. She writes, *"Prophecy is nothing more than Christianity at its best. We are called to live the Word ourselves, to say a prophet's word, so that others may live better because of us."* (1)

The Church of the Brethren has work to do. I am aware each Sunday that I am basically "preaching to the choir" - which means that I am preaching a word that many of you agree with and support. I feel blessed and fortunate to pastor a congregation that attempts to be open, affirming, inclusive and, dare I say, radical in our faith. But we too fall short of who we are called to be.

And for too long our denomination has been silent in the face of evil and injustice. If there was ever a time the world needed to hear the revolutionary good news of Jesus from a peace church, it is now.

We, as a denomination, are called to be shapers of a new world in Christ's name and instead we hide behind decades-old Annual Conference statements.

We are called to speak truth to power, to march in the streets against injustice and instead we cling to the fear that we will alienate other people in the church.

We are called to resist any form of idolatry, to resist worshiping anyone or anything above our God, and yet we pledge allegiance to the flag and participate in the lie of American Exceptionalism.

We are called to bring the scriptures to life and to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and yet we demand that our preachers and leaders not be so "political" in their words and deeds.

Sister Joan quotes Mother Maria Skobtsova, an Eastern Orthodox monastic who said, *"I am your message, God. Throw me like a blazing torch into the night, that all may see and understand."*

Sister Joan issues a challenge to us: *What message do people get from us? What sky do we light up so that others may find their way to a new peace and clear justice in a violently unjust world?" (2)*

The vineyard has been prepared and planted. May we have the courage to be God's abundant, dazzling, bountiful crop. God is still singing a love song. Are we listening?

Amen.

END NOTES:

- *THE TIME IS NOW: A CALL TO UNCOMMON COURAGE, Joan D. Chittister. Convergent. 2019. P. 61.*
- *Chittister, pp. 70, 74.*