

HOMILY SUNDAY 04-C

“Be a Prophet of God’s Unconditional Love”

(Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19; Psalm 71; 1 Cor 12:31-13:13; Lk 4:21-30)

A black pastor in the southern States was preaching eloquently to his congregation. One elderly lady in particular was responding to his every statement with an enthusiastic “Amen.” It went like this: “Got to stop this drinking,” - “Amen.” “Got to stop this drugging!” - “Amen.” “Got to stop this bingo.” Suddenly her reply changed: “Now he stopped preaching and started meddling!” she exclaimed.

Do you see yourself as a prophet?

Be a prophet of God’s unconditional love.

There is what I would call a “Prophetic Progression” to the readings today. In the first reading, Jeremiah is appointed a prophet by God, strengthened and prepared for inevitable resistance. In the gospel, Jesus, THE prophet sent by God, amazes his own townspeople at first, but then experiences their rejection. And in the second reading, St. Paul interjects his beautiful and inspiring ode to love.

What are we to make of this medley of readings? May I suggest that we see ourselves as prophets of God’s unconditional love?

I propose this because we are called to be prophets just as surely as Jeremiah was called. We have no choice – at our baptism we were anointed priests, prophets and shepherd kings. That being so, it makes sense for us to explore just what being a prophet involves.

Shirlyanne Threndale, a lay woman and professor of scripture at Newman College in St. Albert, gave a talk in Saskatoon sometime back about our call to be prophets. She defined a prophet as “someone who sees beyond the ordinary; who helps us see the fidelity of God in situations of infidelity; the forgiveness of God in situations of conflict; the unconditional love of God in situations where love is desperately lacking.”

That definition fits Jesus, who as we saw last week was anointed by the Spirit to bring Good News to the poor, to free captives and give sight to the blind. At first his townspeople were impressed and even amazed by him. But then their mood suddenly turned and they not only rejected him, but also wanted to kill him. Why would this be so?

It has to do with the above definition. His very own townspeople were unfaithful, conflictual, and lacking in love. They interpreted the liberating power of God’s Word as meant only for them as a chosen race to free them from their political oppressors. However, Jesus came announcing not a national deliverance but God’s promise of liberation for all the poor and oppressed regardless of nationality, gender, or race. When the racial inclusiveness of Jesus’ announcement became clear to those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, their commitment to their own community boundaries took precedence over their joy that God had sent a prophet among them. In the end, because they were not open to the prospect of others’ sharing in the bounty

of God's deliverance, they themselves were unable to receive it. The result of their narrowness was rage and acting out of anger in an attempt to kill him, to get rid of the prophet.

The lesson is clear. The healing power of God's Word is meant for all peoples of all times. We are never free to put any limits on God's grace. We are simply invited to experience the Good News for ourselves, and share it with all others. The radical inclusiveness of God's grace is always a challenge for us, as our instinct, like the people of Jesus' day, is to narrow it down to benefit only us.

Since the greatest need in the world today is love, unconditional love, then we must be prophets of unconditional love. Kids that are not loved enough, become emotional cripples, and then adult children who raise other adult children, the source of dysfunctional families. The cure is love, unconditional love, prophetic love that breaks the cycle of un-love and points to a God who is unconditional love.

St. Paul cuts to the marrow with his description of what genuine love is. The best way to check on how we are doing at living out this type of agape love is to put the word "I" in the place of the word "love." Let's read it together that way to see how it sounds when applied to us personally:

"I am patient, I am kind; I am not envious nor boastful or arrogant or rude. I do not insist on my own way; I am not irritable or resentful; I do not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoice in the truth. I bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things." Does that sound like you and me? If so, I would dare say that we are prophets, prophets of unconditional love.

Pope Benedict XVI surprised everyone with his first encyclical entitled "Deus Caritas Est" which means "God Is Love." Where most people expected a hard-hitting exhortation to greater fidelity mixed with condemnations of liturgical abuse, the pope came out with a letter that spoke only of the nature of genuine love, and how the Church can live a life marked with greater love. Amazing – and prophetic to say the least! One author even compared that letter about love, to the fresh winds of the Second Vatican Council called by Pope John XXIII.

Pope Benedict is a very intelligent man, and does not do things lightly. That encyclical was no accident or flash-in-the-pan. The same pope surprised the world again in a very similar way when he spoke to the gathering of families in Valencia, Spain some time later. He did not come out strongly against anything, such as abortion or same-sex marriages, but rather spoke of what was positive in the Church and in the world. When asked why, he simply stated that for too long the Church was seen as a harbinger of negativity, and that it was time to be positive, to affirm what was good and beautiful and true. Truly, he is a prophet of unconditional love, and an inspiration to us all.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is a prophetic meal announcing God's love to all, sharing God's very own love with us in the Body and Blood of His Son who loved us unconditionally, empowering us to be prophets of love.

So, live your baptismal call – be a prophet of unconditional love to all you meet.