

Prophesy!

Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup Lecture on Christian Unity June 12, 2011 Sharon E. Watkins

I have occasionally had the opportunity to play a certain genre of Bible trivia game where one of the categories of question and answer is “prophecy”. I have avoided that category whenever possible.

In those games, “prophecy” usually has to do with predictions of the “end time”. They feature heavily the more lurid details out of Revelation and Daniel – scary matters of beast or last battle. Sometimes they highlight the occasional chapter from one of the Gospels or Epistles, warning about thieves in the night and people suddenly whisked away from earth. (Right in time for this very lecture, the news has been full of just this kind of end-time fascination, with endless attention being paid to wondering about the exact day and time of the world’s appointed demise.)

For the last 30 years, I have lived with a biblical scholar, Dr. Rick Lowery, who has written two books on Daniel and Revelation, and I have to say that this popular definition of prophecy – predicting the date and chronology of the end times – is not a big preoccupation in our house. We tend to avoid this type of end time thinking altogether . . . although judging by the success of books like the “Left Behind” series, it might have been more to our family’s economic advantage if my author-spouse had given a little more attention to predicting the end of the world!

In spite of my discomfort with end-time predictions – whether in game or novel or radio/television form – on this day of Pentecost 2011, I want to invite us think about . . . well . . . prophecy. And especially about prophesying.

But let’s take a slightly different definition of prophecy and prophesying. In much of biblical tradition, “prophecy” is less about predicting future events or naming the end of days and more about having eyes to see the world of God’s desiring, and the heart to long for that world. Prophesying is about beginning to live into that vision now and calling upon others to do the same. Thus, Pentecost – when we traditionally read out of Joel, “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy . . .” – is a great day for a little prophetic visioning – a day for focusing our eyes on the world as God wants it and then seeking the Pentecost power to act upon what we see.

Letty Russell was an important ecumenical theologian and activist from the late 20th century (and one of my favorite professors.) She understood prophecy as seeing God’s intended world. In her book *The Future of Partnership*, Russell played a bit with Alvin Toffler’s notion of *Future Shock*, where “future shock” is understood as “maladjustment with the present because of a longed-for past.”¹ “Future shock,” she said, “leaves people not knowing how to cope and fearful of the unknown because they are thrust into a world where there are no familiar landmarks or customs.”²

Russell’s solution for those of us uncomfortable with the present because of a longed-for past, was to redirect our gaze toward the future, toward God’s future. God’s

¹ *The Future of Partnership*, Letty M. Russell, Westminster Press 1979, p. 102

² *Ibid*, p. 102

future is well described in biblical texts. The landmarks there are well known. The landmarks of God's future are justice and compassion, unity and wholeness. By focusing on the future, Russell suggested, we would be inviting a voluntary "maladjustment with the present (but) out of a longed for future."³ She called such maladjustment "advent shock", and she called us to embrace it! She said, "Because of advent shock we seek to anticipate the future in what we do, opening ourselves to the working of God's Spirit and expecting the impossible . . . in such a perspective we will see ourselves as pilgrims on the way to tomorrow."⁴

That's the kind of prophecy I'm talking about! Where we see the world of God's desiring as represented in biblical witness and begin to live it – now!

Pentecost is a day every year when we call to mind that type of prophecy – fulfilling the Joel passage that your sons and daughters will prophesy. On Pentecost we remember the birth of the church as disciples caught the vision of God's saving love with such power that it could not be contained. They poured out onto the streets to proclaim it in many languages but with one voice. And it was catching. The church at its birth was a movement for wholeness, a witness for unity, as the disciples proclaimed the love of God so that it captured the attention of people across the normal boundaries of nation and culture, language and faith. From that day, God's vision of unity and wholeness for all God's children, lived through the church, began to change the world.

At this 2011 Joe A. and Nancy Vaughn Stalcup lecture let's prophesy a bit in the biblical manner. Let's strain to catch God's vision and gear up to live into it. I propose that we focus first on God's vision for the world as we Disciples tend to understand it through scripture – a Disciples perspective which is always ironically and (sometimes) awkwardly an ecumenical perspective of unity or wholeness. (We are, after all, a community whose very birth certificate was a last will and testament! We are, as Kenneth Teegarden said, a people for whom unity is like peace is for the Quakers or . . .) Then let's reflect a bit on how we are called to live that vision of unity and wholeness through the church – as sacrament or sign to the world – and how we might focus our own prophetic imagination and Pentecost power through practices of welcome, charting waters of disagreement, and making a public witness for wholeness through love of God and neighbor.

That's a lot for one afternoon, but let's see what we can do.

God's Vision⁵

The Bible is rich in images of God's desired future. Biblical text describes God bringing the nations together in a new world of justice and peace. Sabbath is observed, the bonds of injustice loosed, the hungry eat, the homeless are sheltered, the naked covered, and nations stream to the light. (Isaiah 58:6-7, 60:3)

The Hebrew word *shalom* and its Greek equivalent *eirene*, both commonly translated as "peace," describe a world of completeness, fullness, health, well-being, and prosperity.⁶ They are perhaps best translated by the English word "wholeness." In many

³ *Ibid.*, p. 102

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.102

⁵ Much of this section was first published in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, Peter Heltzel, Chalice Press, 2008, Chapter 13, "The Church as a Sacrament of Human Wholeness," Sharon Watkins and Harold Keith Watkins, p. 134ff.

⁶ Concerning *shalom*, see Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2001), 1532-1536.

prophetic passages, these words describe a covenantal relationship that results in harmony with God, with other people, and with creation itself – where the world is filled with the intimate knowledge of God; even the wolf and the lamb can live together; the leopard can lie down with the kid; ... and they will not hurt or destroy (Isaiah 11:6, 9).

Though visionaries, the biblical prophets do not look at the world through rose-colored glasses. They are hopeful realists. They understand that the world is broken and its people fragmented, in need of repentance and repair. Yet these prophets hope that, by God's power, the world can mend. Isaiah, the prophet, prophesies, "The LORD has anointed me, has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, to comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:1-2). The world is broken and sick, but God is at work to heal and restore, to bring wholeness to the whole inhabited earth, the *oikumene*. Here is the original ecumenical vision.

This prophetic witness lies at the heart of Jesus' message and ministry as portrayed in the gospels. According to Luke, Jesus began his ministry, in his home synagogue, by proclaiming Isaiah's ancient vision of wholeness. The synoptic gospels witness that Jesus built his movement on the conviction that the reign of God was springing forth into history precisely in the midst of a people beaten down by the unrelenting pressures of economic and political division and oppression in the Roman Empire. Healing the sick and exorcising the demonized, Jesus restored feared and marginalized people to full participation in community. Marshaling the seemingly meager resources of the community gathered, he showed his disciples that when the community shares its resources, everyone can be fed, with fish and loaves to spare.

The logic of sharing, of community, of the commonwealth of God, stood in stark contrast to the logic of Roman imperial power built on military might, social status, and economic concentration in the hands of an elite few. The reign of God, God's commonwealth, would transform the political, economic, and spiritual structures of the world, giving the vast numbers at the bottom of society newborn hope, an opportunity to live life abundantly, to become the complete, whole people God intended them to be. No more division on the basis of economic class or political power.

Paul and others in the early Christian movement kept faith with Jesus' prophetic vision of human wholeness⁷. Paul discusses the connection of Jews and the Law with Christians and the Gospel. After asserting that the foundation for both communities is faith in God, Paul claims that Christ has broken down the wall that divides people according to class, gender, social status, and political condition (Eph. 2:11-14, Gal. 3:28). Though often confused and limited in their vision, the Christians reflected in the epistles were struggling to build communities that overcame the fracturing pressures of everyday life in the Roman empire, to realize the different kind of life that was possible by the same power of God that raised Jesus from the dead, a life consistent with the teachings of Jesus who had organized everything around love of God and neighbor.

God's intention expressed in the prophetic search for shalom, Jesus' witness and proclamation and the apostles' teaching, is that the human community, indeed the cosmos, though broken, divided and dying, can and should live in shalom, in peace, in wholeness.

⁷ For example, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004).

This is an ecumenical vision that understands the healing of a broken church to be foretaste of the healing of a broken world. It goes to the root of the word *oikumene*. Bringing wholeness to the whole inhabited earth is at the root of the ecumenical vision. Because of the vision of God's wholeness as lived through Jesus Christ, because of a prophetic "seeing" of our future in God, we become maladjusted to the way things are. In Letty Russell's words, we begin to experience advent shock. We start desiring to live already "as if" God's way were our way, as if God's future were already here. We pray, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven."

Out of such prophetic seeing grows the vision that Disciples, indeed all ecumenical Christians, share of unity, of wholeness, where there is no more crying or pain, no walls or barriers among people, no oppression of worker for personal gain, no passing by on the side of the road in the face of a neighbor's need, no more Table that cannot be shared. For the sake of the world, we want to live already as if it were so. And that is where the church comes in. For the prophetic vision of Disciples has always been if we begin to live it now, we help to make it so; we become part of bringing in God's reign; we serve as evidence that the reign of God is indeed at hand. Part of the Disciples vision has always been that part of the healing of the world involves the healing of the church.

Our Calling

Elsewhere I have called the church "a sacrament of wholeness", a visible sign of God's in-breaking reign of Shalom⁸. To speak of the church as a sacrament means that its concreteness as a social form allows us to perceive a reality that is greater than the world we experience now. The early chapters of the book of Acts show us such a community. From the Pentecost moment where the Holy Spirit took hold of a dispirited, frightened, discouraged group of Jesus' followers and made of them a power surge of vocal and physical witness, people in that upper room experienced forgiveness and received a new spiritual power. Ethnic separations were overcome as people heard the gospel in their own languages. New communities were formed in which participants experienced great joy. A new spirit of generosity emerged that bound people together despite the fact that they represented different social classes. (All who believed held things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Acts 2:44-45)

For a while, at least, the people "who were being saved" could believe that the holy commonwealth, God's empire, had already broken in upon them. Through the church, it was God's government, not Rome that now ordered their lives and gave them a foretaste of so much more.

Our possibility in the 21st century is to see that same trans-historical vision and pattern of the future, to capture that prophetic vision, to be the sons and daughters who prophesy: who name the future as God reveals it to us in scripture and in the life of Jesus and the early church, to name it and to live it, demonstrating our advent shock, our unwillingness to stay with the present as it is because of the vision we already have of God's future and the impatience we have to begin experiencing it right here, right now.

⁸ *Chalice Introduction*, Helzel, ed.

Disciples always believed we could make this move. According to Jesse O. Hale, Jr, in the *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*⁹, “The basic notion was that . . . (U)nity based on the scriptural pattern would lead to the evangelization of the world, and this unity could usher in – the millennium(!)” The early days of our movement were not just about us but about ushering in the reign of God – for the world. We saw ourselves living in the light of Jesus’ prayer of John 17:20 – that all might be one so the world would believe. In other words, if we would just live as one, the world would become as one – more nearly like the biblical prophetic visions of justice and wholeness, of unity and peace.

And so for any Christian unity movement of the last two centuries, we Disciples have been there! We were part of the post-WWII conciliar movement: for the sake of the world. Together we participated in the healing of Europe, the struggle against Apartheid in South Africa, the Civil Rights movement in the USA. We always believed we Big D Disciples of Christ should go out of business – although not just merging into another denomination but sinking into “the Body of Christ at large” joining everyone else as little “d” disciples, as followers of Jesus. That’s why our identity statement insists: we are “part of the one Body of Christ . . .”

So what does it take – in our time or in any time? – in our church or in any church? – to live as a sacrament of the wholeness that God desires for all of creation?

For Disciples, our core practices are part of our being a movement for wholeness, part of our being a sacramental sign of God’s in-breaking reign. No Creed but Christ, we have said – no doctrinal walls or boundaries separating us here. With profound simplicity we maintain that to profess our faith in Jesus is adequate basis for Christian community, a strong foundation for our covenant with God and with each other.

Our insistence on an open table – at Christ’s invitation all are welcome – is a visible sign already of God’s unconditional love for all God’s children where God’s house is a house of prayer for all people. (Isaiah 56:7). In this movement for wholeness the barriers are few, the bridges many. Our practices of radical welcome are not meant to differentiate us from any other Christians but to anticipate a world where all persons have a place of honor and safety and abundant life in the commonwealth of God. Our core practices of radical welcome are part of our prophetic, ecumenical witness.

But it’s not just who is welcome that matters. It’s how we live together that makes the strongest witness to God’s in-breaking reign. When everybody is welcome, we’re going to have disagreements. The community of Acts 2 where all was held in common quickly gave way to theological debate that required the calling of the church council of Acts 15. Though Paul wrote about a Christian reality where there is “no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female,” (Gal. 3:28) reality defined by Roman custom set in for the Corinthian church where the wealthy were back to asserting their pre-eminence over the working poor and slaves. Paul found himself issuing some stern reminders: “Those who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment upon themselves!” (I Cor. 11:29.)

As a movement for wholeness, as a sacrament of God’s in-breaking reign, we need to know we’re going to enter the waters of disagreement. But we also need to realize that how we disagree with each other says more about the vision we share than

⁹ *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, Paul Blowers, Douglas Foster, Newell Williams, ed., p. 598)

what particular matters we may agree on. The world can disagree violently, but we must not. The care and respect that we offer to each other in our disagreement is where we will make our mark, where we will display our commitment to unity, our vision for wholeness, our bedrock belief that coming together in Christ is enough to make us one and becomes the fundamental sign to the world that God intends the world to be one. It starts with us.

With us having the prophetic vision to see the world as God intends and the Pentecost power to live it. Then people can look at us and say, "See how they love each other!" and they can want to share in that love.

For the Sake of the World

The vision is clear. Still, on this Pentecost Sunday, as any day, we are seriously challenged. Instead of a maladjustment in the present due to a longing for God's future, we continually find ourselves just well-adjusted enough that is difficult to find the motivation to go pouring out onto streets – and yet that is where the action is. As important as it is to start with the church, it is more important not to end there.

You may remember the children's saying (with hand gestures!), "Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the doors and see all the people." Ben Bohren, the regional minister of the Northern California/Nevada Region has up-dated it to go like this: "Here is the church." (Here, Ben shows the gesture for people in the church.) Then he continues: "With prayer and with vision; open the doors - go out and do mission!"

Today's world is much like the Jerusalem world of that first Pentecost outpouring. Many peoples, many languages, many who do not know that God is love. Just as many in Jesus' day were crushed by a hierarchical Roman Empire that counted only those closest to the Emperor of any value at all, so today millions are disempowered by a global economic system that does not value their labor and leaves them in poverty, sickness and despair. In our own time the ecumenical challenge is to seek the wholeness of the whole human family – to see oneness in the midst of rich racial/ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as in the different forms of Christianity which have long been the barriers we have sought to dismantle.

In our time we struggle to recognize that Christianity is no longer a western religion; it lives most strongly in the world south and is going to look different than what we have been used to. In our own front yard Christianity can no longer be lived as an attractional religion – new generations of Christians will only be reached if we go to them with a vision of God's world of wholeness and hope, a vision which we live with Pentecost power. It will only make sense if we prophesy with our lives.

Our ecumenical witness in the 21st century calls us to make a public witness for wholeness through love of God and neighbor (living now as if God's justice is just at hand and already visible in us). In God's world, people have jobs, they are healthy and whole, they are forgiven. In God's future, the most unlikely of bed-fellows rest together. In God's future, justice is done, bellies are filled, tears are dried. As ecumenical Christians, our maladjustment with the present where such is not the case already, must be manifest. As sacrament, we begin to embody already a different way. Such is our ecumenical witness – as Disciples, as Christians. Because we have always believed that if we could just live it, God's world would break in through us.

Conclusion

On Pentecost, the disciples poured out onto the street. They made their voices heard, able to communicate in the language of the people they were reaching. They formed communities that confirmed to the message they proclaimed. They prophesied. And many understood the truth of the love of God – and were saved.