

“Let’s Stop Pretending”

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August 30, 2020

Pentecost 13



The Prophet Isaiah

Readings

Doom to you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness in place of light and light in place of darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!

~ *Isaiah 5:20* from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil, and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other.... Don't be defeated by evil, but defeat evil with good.

~ *Romans 12:9-10, 21* from *The Common English Bible*

If you're feeling a bit worn down by what you're seeing and hearing these days, you should know that you are not alone. You should also know that there are many people just like you who are finding a place of energy, focus, and yes, joy in the midst of what we all know are some very difficult realities. There are important and time-honored ways of shifting attention and energy from the world as we perceive it, taking us toward the world as we would dream it. I'll let you in on a little secret: this is why we continually gather as a church community. It isn't about entering some ethereal head-space that takes us away from our bodies or from the ground beneath our feet. It isn't about ignoring what is going on and hoping for the best. What we're looking for is a shift in energy, an adjustment of trajectory; and we need it daily, maybe multiple times a day. Like a ship sailing across the open seas, we need to make regular and incremental decisions to hold our center and to continue in a forward direction regardless of the conditions around us. It's called staying the course, and to do so we need to harness all the energies available to us, and get in their flow as they take us to all the destinations we so long for.

A good portion of my life has been devoted to the study of the ancient Hebrew prophets, and perhaps you wonder what they might have to do with any of this. They've never been an easy read (unless you ignore all their messages of woe and divine judgment and go straight for the promises of divine blessing). Living hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophets lived lives that were at the very least unenviable, as they cried out against the evils of their times, spoke truth to power, and invited the wrath of the powerful. They were never purveyors of any "gray areas." You never had to ask them what they really thought. A good example is the first Isaiah who said "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil." Statements like this are more about contrast than accommodation.

Our contemporary prophetic voices are not unlike those of the prophets. Political discourse is all about contrast—why your side is better than the other one. The history of our nation is steeped in persuasion. Persuasion when it is successful translates into power. Power leads to the opportunity to govern. Governance when based on factual data and a commitment to the common good leads to positive and lasting change. But there's something in this chain that is obviously broken for us, and it needs to be mended so that we can find a positive vision for the future. This breakdown is in the area of truth, and how in our human evolutionary spiral we arrive at facts, data, and science.

Humankind was once convinced that the world was flat. That, of course, is demonstrably untrue, but it took time, patience, and the willingness to observe and ask questions before the truth could be clearly perceived by masses of people. It took the ability to say, "I might have been wrong all along, and if so, I am willing to say so." I believe that modern day scientists are some the prophetic voices of our time. They say, "Based upon what we know, this what appears to be true. And if this is true, we need to behave differently, as if our lives depend on it, because they very well might."

Many people religiously staked their claims on a flat earth. They vilified those who disagreed with them; they made them wrong. In some cases they executed them. And in doing so they perpetuated the notion that science and religion could not co-exist, that one would have to make a choice between the two. To be honest science, like religion, is not without its limitations. The longer we live, the more we know. The more we know, the more we know about what we don't know, and this is what leads us to the green growing edge of human evolution and understanding.

The sacred scriptures are a record of ancient peoples who struggled with that evolution. It is easy from our vantage point to see what happened when they attempted to stake their claim on one particular moment with one particular idea and make it the norm for all times and peoples. The Apostle Paul made this error when he suggested that slaves should obey their masters and that women should be silently subservient to their husbands. Humanity reached a tipping point when the subjugation of single races and classes of people could not be supported by what was demonstrably true: that all persons are equally human and entitled to the same rights and privileges as everyone else. We reached another tipping point a hundred years ago when white women were finally granted the right to vote, after people began to recognize what was demonstrably true: that female voices carried equal weight with those of their male counterparts. And in 2015, when the Supreme Court decided in support of same-sex marriage, that decision came about in recognition of what was demonstrably true: that love is love, and that the rights and privileges of marriage are not to be denied to certain populations based upon who they love.

Now in 2020, we are at another tipping point in another expression of what is demonstrably true: that *black lives matter*. Some people have put down stakes in racially motivated voter suppression, or in racially profiled policing practices. Some will say that health care is a privilege for those who can afford it, or that strong women of color are mean. These things are not true, and as a people, we should stop pretending that it's ok to say that they are. But how will we find our voice? And where is our model for how to go about it?

Centuries after Isaiah, it was Jesus who offered the prophetic voice of truth-telling, but his words did not stand alone; they were woven into the fabric of something else, something larger and more comprehensive, and that was love. In the letter to the Romans, Paul says, "Love does not rejoice in falsehood, but rejoices in truth." He told them to "love without pretending." What we can glean from these words is how harsh, judgmental, and polarizing truth can be when it is expressed without love. And love, when it is devoid of truth is meaningless. It isn't love at all.

We are moving into what will probably become the most brutal election season in the history of our country. The angrier we become, the easier it will be for us to participate in its brutality. Let us not confuse a prophetic voice with a mean one. Let us speak the truth in love, by listening as best we can to those with whom we disagree, while being ready, willing, and able to point out demonstrable falsehoods. We should also give great care to the sources of what we think we know, and be willing to say when we are wrong. Our posts and tweets and our emails have to be based in reputable, demonstrable facts, data, and science, and our comments, when we make them, need to be expressed in loving disagreement.

No one thinks this will be easy, but that's why we're here each week—to help each other navigate these stormy seas. Our sails have to be made of truth, and our rudder is always love, keeping our eyes glued to the horizon where a peaceful shore awaits.

