

Protagonist Corner

A Prophetic Pentecost in Jerusalem, San Antonio, and Your Hometown

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I'm one of those ministers lucky enough to serve a congregation willing to grant its pastor a sabbatical leave. When Columbia Seminary invited me to participate in the 2002 Campbell Scholars Seminar, the folks at University Presbyterian Church were not only willing to let me go, they were enthusiastic about it, sending me off with prayer and good wishes, hard candies and hand lotion to sustain me on my one thousand mile drive to Atlanta, and a commitment to engage in their own sabbatical reflection on the Campbell Scholars' theme, "The Mission of the Church in a World of Hungers."

For ten Sundays, I was granted what was great luxury for a preacher: the privilege of worshiping God in a variety of wonderful congregations from the location of the pew rather than the pulpit, and Sundays that were truly Sabbaths rather than responsibility-packed marathons.

Driving home from church on one of those sabbatical Sundays, I took a wrong turn. To be candid, I took several wrong turns! But being in a Sabbath frame of mind with nothing on my agenda for the rest of the day except reading the paper, taking a nap, and going out to dinner with friends, I said to myself, "Here I am on Peachtree Street. It's Sunday, and there isn't much traffic. I think I'll just take the scenic route back to the seminary and check out the sights."

So I did. There is a lot to see driving down Peachtree: restaurants, ultramodern office buildings, hotels, and churches. Driving down Peachtree along about noon on Sunday, what caught my eye above everything else were the churches: how many there are, how big they are, how many people spill out of their doors onto the sidewalks of downtown Atlanta. "Wow," I thought to myself, "think of everything all these people could be doing right now, and here they are in church, seeking God."

Monday morning dawned, and I gathered once again with my Seminar colleagues to reflect upon Isaiah 58, the text that was at the heart of our wrestling with the reality of hunger in the global context. I was still thinking about the people of all those churches along Peachtree as well as those in my own church back home in San Antonio when, in my mind's eye, the people to whom Third Isaiah may have been speaking loomed large. I imagined how it might have been for them, coming back home to Jerusalem through the good graces of King Cyrus and how, when the plans were drawn up for the Temple restoration, he'd even made a sizable contribution to the capital campaign. The architects had been paid; the construction crews had loaded up their camels and moved on to the next job; the rededication ceremony had been held; and worship attendance was at an all-time high. "Wow," someone driving by might have commented, "think of everything all those people could be doing right now, and here they are in the sanctuary, seeking God."

Unless the someone driving by was God.

All those people spilling out of the Temple doors onto the street caught God's eye. Only God didn't say, "Wow, that's great, isn't it?" Rather, God slammed on the brakes,

jumped out of the driver's seat, and, spotting the prophet standing on the street corner, ran over to him, grabbed the prophet by the lapels, spun him around in the direction of the temple, pointed a divine finger, and said, "Okay, this is what I want you to do:

Shout out, do not hold back!
Lift up your voice like a trumpet!
Announce to my people their rebellion,
to the house of Jacob their sins. (Isaiah 58:1)

As it turned out, my sabbatical experience with the 2002 Campbell Scholars felt a lot like this. As I tussled with Isaiah 58 in the company of scholars, theologians, and pastors from Jamaica, Zimbabwe, Argentina, Ireland, Ghana, and Atlanta, interacted with seminary students and faculty, spent a bit of time with the prophets of the Open Door community, and, yes, sat in a pew for a change, being challenged by some able and prophetic Atlanta preachers, I felt the Spirit grabbing me by the collar, looking me in the eye, confronting me with my sinful complicity in injustice and oppression, and pointedly calling me to do a little more shouting and a lot less holding back when it comes to proclaiming God's justice and righteousness.

As I headed back home to San Antonio, it occurred to me that the Spirit isn't calling just me and other preachers in the manner that the Spirit called the prophet back in the sixth century B.C.E. and the 120 closeted believers in Jerusalem on Pentecost who mushroomed into 3000, but the folks of the churches that you and I serve, too. In a nation where religious rhetoric fuels a march to war with Iraq, in a culture where religion far too often is really self-serving self-sufficiency disguised as faith, in a world where Americans consume such a huge percentage of the resources of the globe while countless members of the human family are malnourished, the Spirit is calling us *all* to be prophets.

Many years ago, I read Gloria Steinem's *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*. In the book, Steinem writes of how she would often end her lectures with what she called an organizer's deal. She would say, "If each person in the room promises that in the twenty-four hours beginning the very next day she or he will do at least one outrageous thing in the cause of simple justice, then I promise I will, too."¹

Returning to the pulpit after my sabbatical leave and sensing the Spirit's grip on my liturgical stole, I followed Gloria's lead and made what I called a prophet's deal with University Presbyterians. I simply said, "If each person sitting in this sanctuary this morning will do at least one outrageous thing in the cause of simple justice between now and next Sunday, then I promise that I will, too."

And, my goodness, what stunning prophetic outrageousness the Spirit stirred up! A deacon researched socially responsible investment opportunities, made a recommendation to the board of deacons, and, as a result, the deacons' funds are now invested in Oikocredit, which makes loans to cooperatives and microcredit banks in poor countries.² A British citizen who has lived in the U.S. for twenty years downloaded the citizenship paperwork and began the process of moving toward applying for naturalization because, she said, "I need to do this so that my voice can be heard." One member took on the F.D.A., the University of Texas Health Science Center, two U.S. senators, and a congressman, on the matter of clinical trials for cancer patients. Several wrote letters to the editor and public officials about issues of peace

and justice (and have continued to do so as preparations for war have ratcheted into high gear). Another purchased five hundred bandanas, printed up colorful instructions on how to craft a simple hand puppet from the scarves, and has become a one-woman crusader around town, giving the bandana puppets away and demonstrating how these simple toys can be used to break the cycle of violence. A psychologist wrote off co-payments for her clients who struggle to pay even a small amount for her services. I heard reports of outrageous amounts of money being given to organizations like Bread for the World and Texas Impact and of government employees using amazing creativity and professional integrity to meet human need. Two passed on the prophet's challenge to others: a political science professor challenged his students to do one outrageous thing in the cause of justice and, as a result, students have revitalized the Amnesty International chapter on the Trinity University campus, and an Army lieutenant colonel granted those he supervises a half-day of leave to make their prophet's deal good in a concrete way. Perhaps the most touching for me personally was the letter I received from a second-grader. Two five-dollar bills were enclosed in an envelope that also contained a sheet of lined notebook paper on which was painstakingly written, "Dear Lib, hope you're having a good time back. I'm going to give \$10 for habitat for humanity (sic). That's two allowances for me. Do you know where habitat for humanity is? It's from the sermon on Sunday."

I could keep you reading this "Protagonist Corner" all day with more stories like these because there are lots more indeed. But I'm going to stop here and simply suggest that you head to your study and get to work on your Pentecost sermon. Read Isaiah 58 alongside Acts 2. Be attentive to the Spirit's grasp on your lapels. And consider the possibility that Pentecost 2003 may be the perfect time for you to make a prophet's deal with the congregation to whom you preach.

Notes

¹ Gloria Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983), 355.

² www.oikocredit.com