



SUNDAY SERMON

Listening to the Prophets

There are a couple of Sundays in the church year when I really dread getting into the pulpit. One of them is Trinity Sunday — because what are you supposed to say about an infinite and inexplicable mystery? The other is the Sunday closest to the fourth of July. Especially when you are preaching at a church in Washington, DC.

As they say religion and politics don't mix; and thankfully Independence Day isn't really a church holiday — or is it? If you turn to page 17 of the Book of Common Prayer, you will find that Independence Day is classed as a Major Feast, at the same level, for example, as St Mary the Virgin and St Mary Magdalene, and ahead of Lesser Feasts like those of St Francis or our own, beloved, St Columba. But whether or not and to what degree we should celebrate our country at church has been debated by Episcopalians since the very beginning.

The General Convention of 1785 — before we had a church constitution or our own Book of Common Prayer — directed that a service be drawn up for Independence day, and "That the said form of prayer be used in this Church, on the fourth of July, for ever." It wasn't. In fact it was dropped from the first prayer book that was adopted in 1789, mostly because many of the priests that were still around from before the revolution had been loyalists. It grated to say prayers for the new country, when they had been used to praying for the king. Independence Day didn't show up again until the 1928 prayer book, and it wasn't elevated to major feast status until 1979.

Politics, politics. The church can't get away from them, despite the separation of church and state we're supposed to have in this country. Especially our church: The Episcopal Church! We may be small by numbers, but we've been closely tangled up with worldly power and money ever since Henry VIII decided he needed a divorce. The vast majority of our nation's founders were Episcopalian — or rather, Church of England, which was the church of the aristocracy, of the ruling class, of the elites.

There's another reason the church can't get away from politics: Jesus himself was political — very political. His central teaching, that God's Kingdom is at hand, was both political and provocative: because if God is King, then Caesar is not. "Your Kingdom come on earth as in heaven" is a treasonous prayer that denies the ultimate authority of the state over our lives. At least, that's how the Roman authorities heard it.

And why, you may ask, was Jesus so upset with Rome? Well, if you can believe it, income inequality in ancient Rome was even worse than it is today. And God's primary concern, and this is consistent throughout the bible, is for the poor. The blistering message we heard from the prophet Ezekiel this morning doesn't pull any punches — Ezekiel is accusing the elites in his own country, not some foreign land: "Its officials within it are like wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain. Its prophets have smeared whitewash on

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Six Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, July 01, 2018

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

their behalf, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, 'Thus says the Lord God,' when the Lord has not spoken. The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress."

Here is our dilemma, friends: Jesus' gospel is aimed at the poor. And most of us are not poor. And Jesus' gospel is an indictment of those in power — and here we sit in Washington, D.C. I get nervous preaching around the fourth of July because I don't want to be one of those prophets that Ezekiel says have smeared whitewash and divined lies to justify the status quo, to claim that "the way things are" are more or less the way God wants them to be. When we make Independence Day a major feast, I fear that we are conflating God and Country in a way that Jesus would find baffling, and that separates us so far from Jesus' own experience of how power operates in the world that we can't even comprehend the words he teaches us to pray.

So what are we to do? How are we to enter into his Gospel, to hear it fresh, and to make sure it's good news for all people? And I do mean all people. It's no good if we begin to understand that maybe Jesus was more concerned about the poor and the powerless than about us, only then to become paralyzed with guilt. We have to learn that good news for the poor really is good news for all — at least it is, for all people who have a heart of flesh beating inside them, for all people who understand that while anyone is oppressed, none of us are free. God wants nothing more than to put that heart of flesh within you — to open your heart to the pain and joy of others, especially those who are different from you, which can't help but open your hands to share the blessings God has given you.

One way to do that is to go out and get to know poor people face to face. That's what all the youth and adult leaders were doing this past week at SCAP.

Another way is to listen to God's prophets. To hear their stories. And to let those stories work inside us to change our hearts. We are commemorating two such prophets today, both of whom died on July first, although 89 years apart: Harriet Beecher Stowe and Pauli Murray. You've probably heard of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and maybe you've even read her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The story she told in that book about the evils of slavery woke up this country to the pain, and the moral damage, this "peculiar institution" was doing to all of us. When Stowe met President Lincoln in 1862 he is supposed to have acclaimed "So this is the little lady who started this great war!"

Pauli Murray is not so well known. Born in Baltimore in 1910, she became a civil-rights lawyer, college professor, co-founder of the National Organization for Women, and the first African-American woman to be ordained in the Episcopal Church. Her 1951 book, *States' Laws on Race and Color*, was a foundational document for Thurgood Marshall when he argued and won the *Brown v Board of Education* case before the Supreme Court in 1954.

When I was reading Dr. Murray's story this week — that's how she preferred to be addressed, Dr. Murray — what struck me was how incredibly challenging each step of her journey was. When things turn out right in the end — like when the Episcopal Church finally decided, in September of 1976, to ordain women — it's easy to pat ourselves on the back for doing the right thing. It's harder to remember how much we struggled and fought to win that equality. Dr. Murray came to the priesthood as a second career: when she graduated from seminary in April of 1976, five months before the decision to ordain women, she didn't know what would happen to her — and she needed to be ordained after three years in seminary. She needed the work.

She was ordained in the end, and she did find some work as a priest, but not what she had hoped for. She was a woman after all, and older, and African-American. Sometimes the fight she had been fighting her whole life made her bristle. It made her seem angry — and maybe she was angry. I mean, How would you feel in those circumstances? At any rate, she was never called as a rector.

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When she was in seminary, her younger, mostly male, classmates had found her challenging to get along with. One of them wrote her a note saying, "You appear to be working for the Glory of women, blacks, and Pauli Murray, rather than to the Glory of God."

Dr. Murray wrote him back: "I'll trade you . . . my pain, my sex, my race and my age — and see how you deport yourself in such circumstances. Barring that, try to imagine for 24 hours what it must be like to be a Negro in a predominantly white Seminary, a woman in an institution dominated by men . . . some of whom radiate hostility even though they do not say a word, who are patronizing and kindly as long as I do not get out of my place, but who feel threatened by my intellect, my achievements, and my refusal to be suppressed."

Try to imagine — put yourself in those shoes — think what it must feel like — to not be among the powerful and rich in this world. Friends, I think the time for oppression is passed. Jesus shows us the way to freedom. But none of us will be free until all of us are. What if we tried acting like the words in our Declaration of Independence were really true: that God has created all of us equal?

Amen.