

PROPHETIC UTTERANCE AND THE BLACK CHURCH

LESSON THREE

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We now turn our attention toward prophetic preaching as it emerges as the dominant theme in black preaching. Dr, Cleophus LaRue, in his work *The Heart of Black Preaching*, has identified five themes around which black preaching are centered: 1) personal piety; 2) care of the soul; 3) social justice; 4) corporate concerns and 5) institutional maintenance.

Whereas all these themes find a hearing in black pulpits, the one that most resonated among blacks was social justice. Social justice preaching never has an aim to overthrow society but the reforming of society in ways that reflect God's concern for fairness and righteousness. When seeking a biblical base for social justice preaching, blacks referred to the Hebrew prophets of old who were willing to speak truth to power. Blacks also examined the ministry of Jesus with a more discerning eye to see the focus of Jesus on social issues in his day as well. Jesus was radical in his view of women and his willingness to include them in his inner circle and give them standing among the men. Jesus' ministry was not confined to Jews alone but included others outside of the Jewish family, including foreigners and even soldiers who worked for the government that was oppressing Jews.

These actions of Jesus provide a window to what a just society would look like because Jesus would be committed to resisting the temptation to live by standards of a fallen world that puts self-interest in front of God interest. Jesus is able to provide this witness of resistance because God has a social vision for creation that is built not on separation but on community where justice, righteousness and peace rule.

Therefore, prophetic preaching in the black tradition has been unafraid to speak a word about God's desire for change in the community no matter what the adapted community standard may be or who was in support of the community standard. Here we are aided by Walter Rauschbusch who stated that prophetic perspective always ran

counter to the religious views and ideals that dominated Israelite society. The prophets used a religion steeped in ethical concerns to challenge popular faith in ritual forms. Since prophets were concerned with ethical matters, it is not surprising that they took sides in matters of state. Thus, prophetic preaching is more concerned with public matters than private morality. It is the opinion of this author that far too much attention is given to individual morality and little to no attention to public morality.

An example of this is the case against President Bill Clinton and his affair with a White House intern. Many in the religious community spoke out for quick action to remove the president from office. Yet, that same group was deathly silent when thousands of American workers lost their pensions in the ENRON accounting fraud. Nor was there any outcry about no-bid government contracts given to a company that Vice President Dick Cheney still has ties to. A company that has since moved its headquarters offshore to avoid paying taxes on the millions of taxpayers' dollars they reaped. Even today, the so-called mortgage assistance plan provides millions in tax breaks for mortgage lenders and builders with no assistance at all for homeowners struggling to pay their mortgages. Prophetic preaching seeks to shine a light on these discrepancies.

Dr. James Earl Massey says the gospel shines the brightest against dark skies. Given this background, one can better understand what biblical tradition Dr. Jeremiah Wright was standing on when he called our nation into account from the pulpit of his church. Dr. Wright was drawing attention in ways that made the gospel shine bright in the darkness.

Charles Campbell calls prophetic preaching “risky preaching” because it is engagement with the powers not on their terms but God's terms. Prophetic preaching is an act of moral obedience to the way of Jesus by ensuring that the truth does not lie down in front of power.

The words of three Hebrew boys help us see this at work in their response to the king and his image. “Be it known to you, oh king, our God can deliver us from your hand. But even if he does not, we will not bow to your image.” The faithful preacher will not be silent but boldly cast a shining light and expose idolatry in darkness and unmask every lie of deception that has kept people in bondage. This kind of preaching may sound pushy and assertive, but we ought to remember as people of faith the Word of God is a sword that cuts the sin around us as well as the sin in us. Prophetic preaching may create conflict and it often does, but if we are going to be truthful to our calling, we must declare the whole counsel of God. We should always remember that faithfulness is more important than effectiveness or success. Many of the prophets were not viewed as successful or effective in their ministry but time has shown us the power of their faithfulness.

Prophetic preaching does not just confront and reveal but also points toward some new possibility centered in hope. My mentor, Samuel Dewitt Proctor, had four themes as subjects for his preaching that were rooted in social justice. Those themes were the following:

- 1- God is still present and active in human affairs and intervenes on our behalf.
- 2- Spiritual renewal and moral wholeness are available to all of us.
- 3- Genuine community is a realizable goal for the human family.
- 4- Eternity moves through time and immortality is an ever present potential.

What Proctor helps us to see is the nature in which prophetic preaching points toward some hopeful future. Those who seek to proclaim a word from God by prophetic proclamation must never forget the important role of pointing persons toward a hopeful future where we are able to live out the intent that God has for all of creation.

Prophetic preaching holds to several basic convictions that have caused it to last for

centuries although some of these convictions are now under attack from inside the church and outside the church. The first of these convictions is a free pulpit. Prophetic preaching holds that no one has the authority to silence the prophet from speaking, thus says the Lord. This has been particularly true with black preaching. The black preacher has not had his/her message approved by some governing body in the church. A sermon like Dr Wright's would have never been heard if it needed approval from church leaders before it was proclaimed. We must protect the freedom of the pulpit to ensure that our preachers do not simply become court jesters cheering the government's every action.

The second of these convictions is the power of the Word of God to bring about change. Prophetic preaching believes that the Word of God has power to do what God said his Word would accomplish. This means the preacher is not under some burden to manufacture change that the Spirit has not brought.

The third of these convictions is fighting for a just cause. The comfort and well-being of the preacher/prophet never come before the importance of the just cause that God has commissioned him/her to speak to.

There are those today who believe the black church is America's best hope for redemption because of the black church's commitment to prophetic ministry and social justice. I fear that the current wave of those both in the pulpit and in the pew are moving the black church in another direction that places more concern on individual concerns than community betterment. Whether or not the black church will hold to this long-lasting tradition of a ministry of resistance remains to be seen. I do believe that every generation needs the voice of prophets that calls us back to a community of justice, righteousness and peace. May this preaching tradition never abandon us until the time when preaching will end and we will live together in that New Jerusalem as redeemed sons and daughters of God.