

Reluctant prophet: Luke 4:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 13, 2004

The results of my efforts at a prophetic ministry have been mixed. I became a parish minister at the time when Barry Goldwater was challenging Lyndon Johnson for the presidency. The Democrats ran commercials that imagined an electoral victory by the warmongering Goldwater, then showed the world exploding. Seeing an opportunity to be involved in the really big issues of life, I delivered a sermon on peacemaking. I barely avoided naming candidates or political parties, but the congregation got the message and laughed good-naturedly at my failed subtlety.

When Johnson won the election, he immediately adopted many of Goldwater's aggressive Vietnam policies. I felt betrayed, and ended my career as a pulpit politician.

A few years later I was part of a pastoral staff in a large church in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. The congregation had been asked by an outside agency to undertake a project for racial reconciliation, but racial reconciliation was not on the agenda of this white, highly threatened church. Older members told me that race had never been mentioned from that pulpit. By then I was the father of a new baby and the husband of a wife with the early symptoms of a debilitating disease. I had lost any desire to be a martyr to noble causes. But the issue was unavoidable. I found myself almost paralyzed by fear one Sunday as I told the congregation as lovingly as I could that seeking racial justice was a part of the Christian calling.

The result of that sermon surprised no one. Most of the congregation expressed appreciation. Several were angry. Members of one family were so enraged that they promised never to return. But some stories have happy endings. That same family sought me out a few years later, thanked me for forcing them to face a blind spot in their faith, and returned to church more active and committed than ever.

Those early prophetic efforts may offer a helpful moral. When prophetic ministry is practiced for the wrong reasons, when its primary purpose is to nourish the ego of the speaker, faith is cheapened. Prophetic ministry is most effective when it is

engaged reluctantly, when it's difficult and even frightening, and when the speaker is compelled by a power that will not be denied.

In Jesus' public reading in his home synagogue, he promised to put his strength at the disposal of the marginalized and encouraged his followers to do likewise. This passage challenges Christians to lay foundations on which communities of peace and justice can be constructed.

Interestingly, the passage from Luke is also a favorite of charismatic Christians, those who emphasize the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals. They focus on the words about anointing, the sense of being grasped by the Spirit. For them those words are affirmation of their basic theological position.

A public reading of the passage will reveal which approach the reader takes. Charismatics put their emphasis on the early verbs: "anointed," "sent." Advocates of the social gospel slide more quickly through the first phrases, then put great weight on the nouns describing the objects of concern: the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed.

Seeing these two as mutually exclusive readings is a great mistake. Both the social gospelers and the charismatics identify real if bifurcated truths. The two readings need each other.

The advocates of a social gospel are correct in seeing this text as central to Christian commitment. Luke makes this event a coming-out party, as it were—the synoptic equivalent of John's account of changing water into wine. Luke has Jesus define himself by his association with the dispossessed. The implication is clear: a Christian faith without a social dimension is a wimpish impostor. The individualism that runs unrestrained through many churches today is a late and tragic corruption of a communal tradition. Paul knew this. He dismissed individualism with a few incisive phrases: "When one member suffers, all suffer." "When one member is honored, all rejoice." As he enumerated the tasks of faith, being an apostle came first; being a prophet came second, preceding such essential tasks as teaching and healing.

But the charismatics see another equally valid truth. Those who enter into a prophetic ministry without proper motivation—speakers who have no sense of being anointed by a persistent, nagging Power—can damage faith as much as those who avoid the prophetic altogether. When we speak publicly on "the larger issues of life" simply because of the feeling of power such action provides, we risk ridicule. "What

do those Christians know about economic policy?" "What do those Christians know about military strategy or international relations?"

The average Christian is not—with some important exceptions—an expert in sociology, economics or international affairs. So Christians, both clergy and lay, who address these issues out of faith must do so with appropriate humility. We can expect to be heard only when it is clear that we are grasped by something larger than ourselves.

The text, then, is about both calling and task. Those who speak out must be able to report: "I cannot refrain from doing this. I am anointed by, pushed by, inspired by One who will not let me express my faithfulness in any other way."

The opening scene of Jesus' public ministry left no doubt: a commitment to Jesus involves a commitment to build communities of peace and justice. But first comes the calling.