

General Synod 34 @Home: Sermon Transcript

For use in local churches of the United Church of Christ:

Focus Scripture: Matthew 10:24-39

Title: “The Prophetic” or “Welcome the Prophetic”

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Sermon

Imagination. Imagination is the ability to conceptualize what has not been realized. To conjure in our mind a picture that has not been drawn, to hear the notes of a song that has never been played, and to conceive a world that has never been true. When we imagine, we do not lie to ourselves, we know the difference between dream and reality. Rather, imagining proclaims not yet over never will be, we can over we can't, and possible over impossible.

Our faith relies upon imagination. As noted in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Even for the early disciples, who enjoyed the privilege of witnessing the ministry of Jesus for themselves, their faith would be stretched, tested, and transformed through the radical teachings of Jesus as well as the improbable things he assured them they would do.

In this gospel text, Jesus prepares his disciples to be sent off as apprentices, a first step toward the assumption of leadership after his physical departure. As someone trained in the trade of carpentry, Jesus would have been particularly familiar with the model of expert-apprentice development. He had already identified those with potential to work with him and to grow into leadership. Jesus nurtured his relationship with them and interspersed teaching with demonstration. Now, the time has come for the apprentices to use their newly acquired understanding and skills. Jesus is not letting them go off on their own forever, but they will be operating under the power he has given them on their own.

Matthew's entire gospel contains the story of commissioning the disciples to continue the ministry of Jesus. Even the genealogies and birth narratives serve, in part, to establish the authority of Jesus, which he spends the remainder of the gospel training humans to receive the delegation of that authority as found in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). Matthew tells his audience, a group of insiders who have been waiting on the Chosen One to deliver them, that the Messiah has come with an ultimate end of delegating the work of fully realizing the kingdom to them.

What Jesus has done, they will be called to do. Jesus taught so they will teach. Jesus healed so they will heal. Jesus confronted those in authority; they will confront authority figures. Jesus demonstrated the kingdom in his day to day life; they will demonstrate the kingdom as they go. Jesus developed disciples; they will develop disciples. The work and ministry of Jesus will become their work and ministry.

Jesus sends them as agents of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration on earth. His ministry has always been incarnation—present and tangible—among the people. Theirs will also be incarnational. At the same time, the ministry is invitational, never imposed, which makes welcome central to its fruitfulness. He also ties that representation to the ministry of the prophet, who represents God's vision of creation as well as admonition and encouragement that proclaims that vision is possible: The prophetic is imaginative. As Walter Brueggemann notes in *The Prophetic Imagination*,

The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation. Our culture is competent to implement almost anything and to imagine almost nothing. The same royal consciousness that makes it possible to implement anything and everything is the one that shrinks imagination because imagination is a danger. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.

When we understand imagination as the primary element the prophet engages, we may also consider how that limits our ability to receive it. Not every prophet has the ability to convey a vision in a way that sparks the curiosity and consideration of their audience. Everyone does not have the same capacity to imagine. We would all be inventors if the gift of conceptualizing the unknown were widely distributed.

Garrett Morgan invented the traffic light and the gas mask. Marie Van Brittan Brown invented a video home security system. As Patrick J. Kiger states, "From the tip of South America to the Arctic, Native Americans developed scores of innovations—from kayaks, protective goggles and baby bottles to birth control, genetically modified food crops and analgesic medications—that enabled them to survive and flourish wherever they lived." Dr. Jose Hernandez-Rebollar created an electronic glove, which translates hand movements from the American Sign Language into spoken and written words. All of these inventions required imagination to address a problem, a need, or a gap. Imagination is a gift; not everyone receives it.

Yet, problems can be easy to recognize. We may try to avoid them or go around them, but normally we can identify that we have a problem even if we don't know the source or the ramifications of it. Inventors see a problem and conceptualize a solution to fix it. Prophets see the condition of this world through the lens of Creator and speak a word of truth to repent, redeem, and restore. Prophets envision reconnection where there's been disconnection. Prophets give hope to the hopeless. Prophets tell a broken world that healing is possible. At the

same time, prophets warn of the peril of life apart from God. Prophets predict the consequences of willful and reckless behavior. Prophets discomfort those who live in comfort at the expense of their vulnerable and marginalized neighbors.

Encouragement and correction both thrive on imagination oriented to the future.

It is much easier to remember. Unfortunately, in our remembering, we can engage selectively. Nostalgia can stifle attempts to imagine a possible future as we compare the costs of reaching for it versus grasping for a romanticized past no matter how futile that attempt may be. How often does the Holy One encourage God's people to forget the former things? Carrying the burdens of the past restricts our ability to welcome the present and to hope for the future promised by the One who makes all things new.

At the same time, the biblical witness often calls the people toward remembrance. The prophets often used the act of remembering in order to stimulate the imagination.

Remember what God has done for you.

Remember this problem of the past that speaks to the challenges of the present.

Remember how the Holy One abided with you, made a way for you, and never abandoned you. The remembering serves as testimony that what seemed impossible becomes possible through divine imagination, intervention, and activity. Miracles happen. People change. Life becomes better. The kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. Remember so you can imagine a hopeful future. Remember so you can live into the possibilities. This is the consistent message of the prophet that calls the church to be a people that imagines the kingdom into being.

I consider myself to be a Trekker. My father introduced me to the original series through the re-runs we used to watch weekly. That series presented an aspirational vision of a future. By the time Star Trek: The Next Generation premiered, much of the original series was outdated because what had first been imagined had become realized. The same has happened with The Next Generation. We can read books on portable devices. We can even communicate with our phones and have them talk back to us. "Hey Siri." Artificial intelligence is not a fantastical dream, it has become a lived reality we must wrestle with in use and outcome. I would not be surprised if someone is still working toward the day we can say, "Beam me up, Scottie!"

Even more than the technological advances, Star Trek envisioned a future where the deeply entrenched differences and acrimony of the present was set aside. The Russian ensign serving on the crew during the Cold War and its corresponding space race was a sign that our enemies can become our compatriots. Star Trek also demonstrated racial and ethnic harmony and collegiality countering the conditions that inspired the Civil Rights Movement. It was a vision of the possible in the midst of opposition and resistance.

In this gospel passage, Jesus also emphasizes ideals and conceptual values of welcome, prophecy, righteousness, and reward. At the same time, he does not allow us to disentangle word from deed. He gives a remarkably specific example in verse 42: "Whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of

these will lose their reward.” The gospel is rooted in real lives, relational interactions, and human need. In this statement, Jesus lifts up the lowly and humbles the exalted while encouraging compassion, generosity, and hospitality. Matthew presents a radical Jesus who liberates through practical acts of meeting human need.

The church continues to struggle with diversity, mutuality, and belonging at a time when, culturally, we have never been more aware of the vast range of distinctiveness among us. Racial, ethnic, gender, age, and ability are only a sampling of the ways in which we are distinct. Political and theological differences may also be measured among us. Difference and distinctiveness are not necessarily divisive in and of themselves. Divisiveness is a response, a choice that makes a neighbor into an enemy simply because we are not uniform in identity, expression, or thought.

Welcome does the opposite. In these three verses, Jesus uses that word six times. It’s an active verb that speaks of hospitality and service. To welcome means to prioritize the comfort of the other over one’s own.

I grew up in a small two family home. My parents, sister, and I lived on the second floor. We had two bedrooms, one bath, living room, dining room, and kitchen. In those six rooms, plus two porches, we lived our lives as a family. When relatives came to visit, my parents would give them their bedroom and sleep on the recliners in our living room. Now, they were very comfortable watching television or spending an evening in conversation. Sleeping in them all night, however, would leave one stiff and a little achy in the morning. My parents never complained and their demonstration of hospitality still informs my understanding of what welcome means.

What if we treated the world that we encounter every day in the same way we treat a favored guest...as a member of the family whose comfort was as important as our own? (Note: I am not referring to abusive situations where self-protection and accountability are the tangible ways in which we love our neighbor.) Pursuit of our own comfort keeps us from hard and holy conversations. Preservation of our comfort maintains the siloed sanctuaries we find in so many of our faith communities. Prioritizing our comfort destroys our imagination and hope for a beloved future.

We can choose welcome over comfort. And, when we welcome the prophetic, we encourage ourselves. We imagine a present and future where the impossible is achieved, where the kingdom of God is complete and has come all around us, and where love and grace abide within us and through us.

Welcome the prophetic in the sanctuary online and onsite. Welcome the prophetic in the public square. Welcome the prophetic in the voting booth or absentee ballot. Welcome the prophetic in chance encounters. Welcome the prophetic at our borders and in our businesses. Welcome the prophetic when it confirms what you believe and when it challenges what you know. Welcome the prophetic with family and foe. Welcome the prophetic in your prayers and in your ways. Let God’s kingdom come and God’s will be done. Welcome the prophetic. Amen.

The Prophetic: A Sermon for General Synod 34 @Home was written by *The Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay, Minister for Worship and Theology, United Church of Christ* for use by local churches.