

I SEND YOU

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

– John 20

The labeling of the Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright as a racist and the repeated playing of decontextualized clips from his sermons is an intentional attack against President Barack Obama. But what these wicked, treacherous and conniving folk have done as well is seek to silence preachers who stand in the prophetic tradition of the black church from speaking out against the evil perpetuated by the country. They have shrewdly taught the ignorant around and among us that to critique is to be un-American and unpatriotic. To call someone un-American and unpatriotic is an attempt to silence and to discredit them and to render their critique invalid. There are people in this country who want to silence the prophetic voice of the Christian church. The Church of Jesus Christ is compelled by the Gospel to be a light shining in darkness. But there are some folk who do not like light and whatever they can do to snuff it out they will seek to do. Jesus condemned these people when He said: *This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil* (John 3:19).

African American preachers have a history of shining light on the evil deeds perpetrated against people of color in this country. For this, they have been lynched, murdered, threatened, unjustly investigated by the federal government and under appreciated by their own community. But these have not deterred the Gospel preacher from crying out against injustice as Isaiah models for us in Isaiah 58:1:

*Cry loudly, do not hold back;
Raise your voice like a trumpet,
And declare to My people their transgression
And to the house of Jacob their sins.*

This passage is not about the personal private lives of individuals but about the unjust practices of a people who try to act holy and righteous but who treat others like garbage. These are people who like to fast and pray to appear holy before men but have no sense of justice and compassion. Isaiah tells them because of their hypocrisy their voices will never be heard on high.

The prophetic tradition of the Christian Church is grounded in the earnest desire of a people to emerge from the tyranny of injustice and poverty. It is an *holy* desire rooted in sheer human dignity and the divine right breathed into us by God at creation. Prophetic work requires a call. No one would dare enter into this work without it. The prophet is one with his/her message. There is no separating him/her from what s/he

speaks. When Ezekiel answered the call he was handed a scroll on which was written lamentations and woe. When he ate it as he was commanded he remarked that it tasted sweet to him, indicating that he and the message had become one. The prophet therefore, has no choice but to preach and, as the Quaker edict says, “speak truth to power.” The prophet has no choice because the pain of the suffering people is woven into the fabric of his being. This is not the kind of ministry from which you can retreat or take a sabbatical. The prophetic ministry is your life. It is all consuming. This is why folk say prophets are crazy. They might appear to mumble to themselves. They are often abrasive and impatient. They are highly sensitive and prickly. But when you have eaten the scroll from the hand of God you are forever changed.

One day Jesus enters a room with a locked door to find a frightened group of cowering men and women. Men and women who has just days before left him alone to suffer at the hands of evil doers. But upon entering, Jesus took no thought of their abandonment of him. They were a forgiven people whose sins were washed away at the foot of the cross they were too terrified to approach. Jesus bid them, “Peace...” “Peace be with you.” Then He showed them His right, His authority, His power, His mantle. He show them His scars. These were the authenticating marks. These were the marks of grace and mercy. When they saw and recognized who Jesus was they rejoiced. Then Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you...”

Here it is. This is what the Christian church is to do, is created to do. We are to do what Jesus did. This is why we must stand in the prophetic tradition. Because Jesus has sent us as the Father sent Him. We are called to do what Jesus did. No, more: *The works that I do shall ye do also, but greater works shall ye do because I go to the Father.* Can you imagine that we have been called to outdo Jesus in bringing justice into an unjust world?

This church of which we are a part, the African Methodist Episcopal Church was born out of the emergent needs of a people, born out of people’s need for justice.

- This church was born because there was a need for people of African descent to be able to worship God in a place the recognized that, to God, they were not second class, not 3/5's of a person, not enslaved by birth.
- This church was born out of a pressing need for justice.
- This church was born in the heart of a community of people who read and studied the scriptures for themselves.
- This church was born in the belly of a people who, filled with the Holy Ghost, could discern the voice and move of God.
- This church was conceived in the collective mind of a disciplined people who were faithful practitioners of the disciplines of the spirit, those who learned and practiced wilderness discipline.
- This church was born in a community of sun-kissed children of God whose indomitable spirit demanded a house of worship in which the Word of God would not come mediated through racist and exclusivist and oppressive matrices of interpretation.

African Methodists have a long standing tradition of fighting for justice:

- Bishop Richard Allen who led worshipers out of St. George's Methodist Church in the 1700s.
- Rev. Archibald Carey, Jr. son of a Bishop of the Church preached the Gospel with power to people in this racist society at the height of the struggle for civil rights.
- The Reverend Oliver Brown, who pastored St. Mark AME Church in Topeka Kansas was a pillar in the movement for civil rights and from that AME church was birthed the landmark case: Brown vs. the Board of Education Topeka.

This is who we are. We are those who struggle for liberation and for justice.

But it seems that the more access we have, the more organizations to which we belong and the more resources we have been able to amass the more silent we have become because we believe access and resources have inoculated us from the deadly ravages of systematic racism and institutionalized hatred.

Black folk have been drinking the kool-aid. Too many Black folk don't want to hear the Gospel anymore, they want to gather to themselves preachers that will tickle their ears and touch their heart with sentimentalism and fairy tales concocted without a shred of biblical truth to them. Which is sheer foolishness when we remember that the first sermon Jesus preached was from Isaiah 61 which says:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor*

There is no escaping this truth, Jesus cares about the poor, the imprisoned, the outcast, the sick, the orphan, the widow, the ugly and the afflicted. Those who follow Jesus cannot be isolationists who care only about what happens in their own back yard, who are looking for personal salvation and personal blessings.

This is heretical teaching. This is error. Personal wealth and material gain is not the aim of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not to say that you should not have material blessings, but to remind you that you are blessed to be a blessing. You are blessed to Gospel others.

The Gospel tradition is not one of denial nor sugar-coating. Mary Poppins' teaspoon of sugar to help the medicine go down is not a part of the prophetic tradition of which we are a

- Sackcloth and ash people
- Rending garment people
- Sitting on ash heaps people

The prophet used whatever means s/he at his/her disposal to force you to hear and feel and experience the great, tragic and horrific injustices suffered by God's people. The

prophetic utterance was to have great impact. It was also often an exercise in longsuffering. While we read these prophetic writings in one sitting, we must remember that these were spoken mostly over long periods of time. These prophets were able to sustain the passion, the power, the purpose. They were not fair-weather folk, they were the ones I am sure Paul had in mind when he taught Timothy:

1 I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom;

2 Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.

3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;

4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.

5 But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry (2 Timothy 4).

The preacher of the Gospel has to ward off the evil spirits of compromise and accommodationism. Folk will try to tell you what to preach and what not to preach. They will try to buy influence through offerings of time, talent and treasure. They will start campaigns to get the preacher to relent from truth-telling. They will offer whatever they think expedient to get their ears tickled. For the time the Paul talked about back then is now. We are living in a time in which people want to be entertained.

- People have been thorough indoctrinated by an entertainment culture.
- People have been lulled into thinking and, therefore, communicating in sound bytes.
- People have been taught to imbibe the opinions of others rather than to turn a thought on their own.
- People have been convinced that if it is displeasing to them then it is not worth their time.

Furthermore, folk have gotten so slovenly and careless in their thinking that when there is something presented to them that they can't get the first time, they dismiss it as unnecessary. The time that Paul talked about is now, people cannot endure sound doctrine. They want to have their ears tickled with platitudes and one-liners and slogans and fodder for bumper stickers rather than to hear a Word that challenges them to a higher level of living

- Than to hear a word that will correct aberrant and ugly behavior
- Than to hear a word that upholds a standard of holiness
- Than to hear a word that really fleshes out the true meaning of righteousness beyond these vapid admonitions to petty piety
- Than to hear a word that demands that the rich share with the poor
- Than to hear the command to love
- Than to hear that love is an action word that means embodying and practicing patience, kindness, humility.

People want to hear that living is going to be easy all the time, that everything is going to go the way they want it to go if they pray in a certain way, that they are never going to

have to suffer. But there is suffering in the world, there is pain in the world, there is sickness in the world, there is poverty in the world, there is racism in the world, there is hatred in the world and if you have been victim of any of these it does not mean that God does not love you or that God does not care. God loves you and God cares. This is why Jesus has sent us as the Father has sent Him. The Gospel of Jesus Christ requires and charges the Christian with resisting these evils in the world.

“Peace be unto you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” We are called to struggle against evil. We are called to be the Body of Christ active in the world

- To restore outcasts to community
- To give sight to the physically blind and insight to the spiritually blind
- To meet wayward women (and men) at the wells where they are and set them on a path of witness and testimony to the goodness of God.
- To stop the persecution of people caught in sin and to lovingly admonish them to chose another course
- To speak life to those laying paralyzed by the pools of life in desperation
- To make and give the wine of happiness and joy to teach the celebration of life
- To stand up and correct errors committed in the name of God
- To love people and to teach people how to love
- To feed the hungry
- To say what needs to be said
- To confront those who hold the reins of injustice
- To expose the deeds of darkness that afflict the people of God
- To recognize that sometimes the sinners are the victims and the church is too often the oppressor
- To recognize that the Christian’s way of living should not hurt people, any people
- To spread the Gospel
- To spread the love of God
- To spread the peace of God
- To spread the joy of God

“Peace be unto you. As the Father has sent me, so I sent you.” Then Jesus breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Ghost.” I am sending you to stand up to injustice in this world. But I am not going to send you by yourself, I am going to send you with power....