



Everyday Prophecy as Consistent Truth-Telling ; Ardent and Consequential Love as Ordinary Faithfulness

I am going to build on my last blog about a spirituality for ordinary time. I was actually surprised at what the first two readings for the fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time B spontaneously prompted in me. The first reading is about the call of Jeremiah to be a prophet; the second is Paul's hymn—a paean really—to love. Seemingly out of nowhere I heard a voice saying to me: "Imagine yourself as a prophet and an ardent lover". I suspect that were I to say the same thing to you: "Imagine yourself as a prophet and ardent lover", your first reaction might be quite similar to my own first take on it: "Who me ? I am just an ordinary bloke, not some special prophet called by God to speak forth on his behalf. I can fantasize, perhaps, an episodic moment of transforming and transfixed ardent love. But I am not a saint, such as Mother Teresa, or a mystic such as the Sufi poet, Rumi. Hadn't I just heard the author, Jerry Needleman, who writes widely on comparative mysticism, tell Michael Krasney on his KQED radio show that, while we may have episodic moments of transcendent love, for most of us the static of the everyday, the dull contours of custom and our fragile egos and fractured characters easily lure us away from its call ? Yet, the fleeting experience points to an alternative way of being So, I said to my inner voice: " Leave such high-fallutin vocations as prophesy to the

Nathans, Samuels, Jeremiahs, Isaiahs or Martin Luther Kings. Didn't even Jeremiah protest when he was first called to be a prophet (in lines, alas, omitted from the selective editing of the first reading in the lectionary): "No, Lord, I said., I do not know how to speak, I am too young. But the Lord answered me: ' Say not I am too young. To whomever I send you, you shall go. Whatever I command you, you shall speak. Have no fear before them, because I am with you to deliver you'" Can't we be allowed to leave consistent ardent love to the Saint Teresa of Avilas and the Saint Francis of this world ?

But, there came, insistently, a rejoicing voice:" Nevertheless, you are called, somehow, to be a prophet and to grow slowly into ardent love. To deny that is to deny your baptism. To refuse to try to imagine becoming a prophet and an ardent lover is to refuse to imagine being a Christian and a disciple of Jesus. That just won't do."

Since it is liturgical Ordinary Time, we may need to find a relatively modest but doable way to construe how we might be and become better Christians and disciples by trying to become a prophet and to grow in love.. At our baptism, when the priest anointed us with chrism—as, indeed, the Old Testament prophets were anointed-- he announced that we, precisely as Christians, are partakers in the prophetic function of Christ. He prayed over us: " He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation. As Christ was anointed priest, prophet and king, so may you live always as a member of his body." Did not Jesus say to all disciples in and through the gospels: " If they haul you before magistrates and persecutors, do not worry what to say. The Holy Spirit will give you the words you need?" At his Ascension, did Jesus not tell the disciples, in words resonant with those spoken to Jeremiah: " Fear not, I will be with you until the end of days".

Perhaps, we shrink from the possibility because we have an overly exalted notion of a prophet. The Greek word – Pro-phetein—means to speak forth, speak out. It does not, necessarily, mean being able to predict the future. Prophets are not always seers. The term refers to those who, like Jeremiah, learned how to speak truth to power.

Paradoxically, the way to grow toward having the courage to speak truth to power is to learn (humbly and with a spiritual discipline) to become truth-tellers in our everyday lives. We do that, first, at prayer, when we can say with David the Psalmist: “Lord, you know me. You know when I sit and stand. You understand my thoughts from afar... Even before a word is on my tongue, You know it all. Where can I hide from your spirit?”. Such spiritual resort to prayer helps us become, first of all, truth-tellers to God and, then, to ourselves. In time, we take on the practice of trying to be a truth-teller to those who surround us-- Not necessarily, haughtily, claiming to ‘tell it as it is’ or ‘tell it as I am sure God directed me to’ but, more modestly, “tell it as I see it with the best of my wits and honesty”.

Such ordinary growth in consistent truth-telling is an essential first form of prophesy. I am quite taken by a poem by the Polish poet and Nobel Laureate who taught for so many years in Berkeley, Czeslaw Milosz. Milosz, in fact, had the credentials of a more exalted type of prophet. His book, The Captive Mind, written in 1953, after he defected from Poland and gained asylum in Paris, spoke out early the truth about the authoritative abuses and deceptions (and the connivance of collaborators) of the Soviet system in Poland. His courage during World War II earned him a plaque at The Holocaust Memorial, Vad Vasham, in Jerusalem as being righteous among the gentiles because of his work to save Jews. A large monument in Gdansk in Poland,

commemorating the workers of Solidarity, bears one of his poems. Still, as an old man, Milosz turned to the humbler task of consistent truth-telling as his chosen form to be a prophet. In a poem, entitled If, Milosz says: “ If I cannot ascend to Paradise—clearly those circles are too high for me—I would like to spend time in one of the regions of Purgatory, gaining liberation from the phantoms of my mind. I would like even yet to see clearly, to not lie to anybody, or to myself, and to invoke, supposing they were there, my good intentions”. It was only from such humble and everyday desires and rhythms of consistent practice that Milosz, in fact, could garner that courage for larger and bolder speaking out of the truth.

Paul’s hymn to love, so often chosen for a reading at Catholic weddings, was Paul’s way of privileging humble, even hum-drum everyday love, over speaking in tongues, the gift of prophesy or the ability to move mountains. It mirrors Jesus’ love for us and God’s love for us, even in our sinfulness and failures. Love, Paul tells us, is patient; kind; is not jealous; is not pompous; does not seek its own advantage; does not calculate evil; passes over somethings in silence; bears all things. Prophecies and speaking in tongues will fade away but love abides. Lest we think Paul’s urging us to such consistent and ardent love is too far-fetched for us humans, remember it closely mirrors Jesus’ own teaching: “ Love one another, as I have loved you. By this will all men and women know that you are my disciples, that you love one another.” In The First Letter of John we hear an echo to this Pauline paeon of praise to love:” This is the message you have heard from the beginning, we should love one another. Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.”. Not that we can work, as a spiritual discipline, to be more loving without grace. Again, The First Letter of John exhorts: “

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God. Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God.” Just as a translation of the call to be prophets, in more ordinary ways, calls for a consistent practice of truth-telling, so our call to be ardent and consistent lovers, in season and out, turns out to demand a daily practice and a slow growth into fidelity. Perhaps, as a simple exercise of giving bite to that practice, we can try showing love to someone we find boring or feel is antagonistic to us. In any event, I want to recommend a spiritual book which also invites us to enter into our potentialities to be prophets and mystics: Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet by Katherine Dykman and L. Patrick Carroll (Paulist Press, 1981)

Once again, I turn to another poem by Milosz, entitled, Love. “ Love means to learn to look at yourself the way one looks at distant things. For you are only one among many. And whoever sees that way heals his heart, without knowing it, from various ills— A bird and a tree say to him: Friend. Then he wants to use himself and things so that they stand in the glow of ripeness. It does not matter whether he knows what he serves: Who serves best does not always understand”.