

Longing for Healing
Third Sunday of Advent
December 14, 2014
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Text: I Thessalonians 5

3 stunning statements - that's how the reading we heard from Thessalonians starts – did you notice? I'll read it again, just in case you weren't stunned the first time: 'rejoice ALWAYS...pray WITHOUT CEASING...give thanks IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES' – 3 stunning statements. How is that possible – feasible – plausible? – to say that it is the will of God in Christ Jesus for one to rejoice/pray/give thanks ALWAYS – in the midst of ALL circumstances? If that does not seem far-fetched to you, then I think it should – 3 stunning statements.

And now that I have made an issue of those implausible imperatives that Thessalonians puts to us, I'm going to just leave that unresolved and move on – because what is the case for me with this passage is that I pretty much see those 3 stunning statements and stop right there – because that is plenty to chew on. But it turns out that this week I actually kept reading further in the passage, and in doing so came across what struck me as another stunning stumper - Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica: 'do not despise the words of the prophets.' Well what in the world is that doing there? You know, part of what I greatly enjoy about being a preacher is finding out how little I know about the Bible – maybe that's a bit overdramatic, but what I mean is that I can easily fall into a sense of thinking I know pretty much what is in a passage, in a story, in a book, in the Bible...and then I come across something that just totally blows me away – I really enjoy that – it is humbling and intriguing. So my preacher job when that happens is to try to have you feel something of the same way, as when we come across this stunner: 'do not despise the words of the prophets.' I'm telling you, if someone gave me a Bible quiz, there's no way I would have said that was in the Bible – so let me tell you why I think that is so peculiar to hear here.

And really to put it simply, it's that there would be no reason to think that for the early church the idea and reality of prophets would be anything but positive. This is the first generation after Jesus' life, death and resurrection, and this is a community formed by the stories of Jesus told among the followers of Jesus – the Gospels were not yet written but the stories of Jesus' life were being shared and passed on. And in the story of Jesus, the words of the prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, play prominently and positively – Jesus is the story of the fulfillment of God's promises heard through the prophets; events in Jesus' life are connected time after time to prophetic words; Jesus himself is called a prophet, revealing in his words and deeds what God intends for humanity. And beyond that positive portrayal of prophets in the story of Jesus, the Jewish tradition itself from which Christianity emerged was one that gave great regard and importance to the Hebrew prophets – voices that spoke the judgment and promise of God. The prophets are...good!...renowned...respected. So why in the world would Paul have to write to this early church community: 'do not despise the words of the prophets'?

Well – it seems that what is going on, is that Paul writes to this community not about the prophets who had come before them – but about the prophets among them; the prophets back then were fine – but people wanting to speak as prophets right now among them and to them, apparently that had the makings for some problems. You see, prophecy is spoken of in the early church as one of the gifts of the Spirit – in Paul's letters it is listed as one of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to bless and build up the church - so to speak of prophets is not just to refer back to the Hebrew scriptures or to the story of Jesus– the voice of the prophet is also given in the present, given to and among the community of believers formed in the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

Which, again, if I was to say just that to you about prophecy in the church – or really if we were just to read that elsewhere in the New Testament, we would say – yes, the gift of prophecy, prophets – that's good. Which means that what I'm getting at, is that this little verse from I Thessalonians 1:20 is a peek at the Early Church's dirty laundry.

You see, what makes this so stunning, is that you might expect Paul to write – ‘listen to the prophets’ – you know, ‘pay attention’, ‘remember the prophets’ – you could understand such a reminder. But - ‘do not **despise** the words of the prophets!’ – wow! – that tells us there are some serious issues going on here. This is a fairly low bar Paul is setting – something better than ‘despise’ when it comes to a prophet! Which simply and fascinatingly tells us that when a prophetic word was being spoken among the early church, people were getting ticked off at the prophets. Why? – because prophets specialize in rattling the status quo; in critiquing the establishment; in questioning the answers. When you have some great names in the prophetic past, you can smile and nod well enough – and ‘isn’t that so true’; but prophets among you are much harder to take – your contemporaries, your allies, your adversaries – who do they think they are to prophesy to you? Because prophecy is not so much about foretelling the future, as it is speaking God’s word into the present – prophecy exposes the disconnect between God’s ways and the established ways. Which means that in Thessalonians 1:20, we get a little look into a big reality – that the church is like most any other human community: a place where conformity and consistency and compliments are quickly valued more than diversity and change and critique. Paul knows there are people whom the Spirit has gifted to be a prophetic voice – and Paul knows that truth-telling from the prophets among us is hard medicine to take; so Paul has the wisdom to say ‘don’t despise the words of the prophets’.

So since Paul was willing to air some dirty laundry about prophets, how about if we do the same? How about if we speak of how instinctive it is for us to despise those who challenge us, critique us – how easy it is for us to dismiss the prophetic voices among us?

What does it mean to be a citizen of this nation, to love this country? – is it to preserve our power and defend our honor; or is it to live up to the values we profess and to hold ourselves accountable for our actions? Or, to be more direct – does it mean that a report concluding that our nation tortured suspected terrorists is an irresponsible threat to

our reputation and security, or a prophetic call to repentance and restorative justice?

‘...do not despise the words of the prophets’

What does it mean to be a white person, when there are individual instances in which unarmed black people are killed by white police officers, and from these incidents national turbulence ensues? If someone is upset about these incidents, shall I hear in their outrage that white people are bad, or police officers are bad, or grand juries are bad? – shall I hear that I am despised so I will despise them: as criminals, agitators, victims (complainers), haters? Or can I hear something different – can I hear beyond a single case to a system that is broken; can I see beyond a person to communities divided and downtrodden; can I look beyond a moment and take in a history of injustice that has led there; can I listen beyond the anger, and hear the pain – can I hear the longing for healing, for hope, for wholeness? Can I hear the prophetic word among all the noise?

‘...do not despise the words of the prophets’

What does it mean to be the church, in such a time as this – in the midst of the turmoil and conflict of nation, world, community - the division and derision around us? and plenty of issues in the church too! Well, the Apostle Paul writes to a church in a world not so different – truly – national, racial, religious division and violence are not new – and neither is squabbling in the church. And Paul says to the church, this is going to be your default reaction with difficult issues: to despise the prophets! – which is to say, more directly, it is for us to despise the gift of Christ’s Spirit speaking God’s word to you – that raises the stakes a bit, doesn’t it? So what if we would catch our tendency, and instead receive the words of the prophets – listen for, take to heart, not despise, but even delight in the voice of the prophet – or dare we say, even be a prophetic voice...? ‘...do not despise the words of the prophets’

I in the past days and weeks have in the paths of my own life and my life shared with church and community and nation and world, felt a deep longing for wholeness – it is

a longing for a healing that is about body and soul, about heart and head, about peoples and communities, about races and relationships, about violence and injustice – a deep longing for the healing that is shalom, the peace that is the presence of God’s true life infused at every turn of God’s creation. And in that longing, I have felt and heard that for the church to be a prophetic voice is about daring to critique the structures around and within us – and when you do that, you set yourself up to be despised; but I have also felt that being prophetic is having the courage to speak about hope, about reconciliation, about justice – about healing, about joy, about peace – because such words too, people may despise.

The Spirit of Christ uses the longing in our hearts – the longing for a healing that is true life, to open our lives to the words of prophets among us – words that shake the status quo of a world of brokenness and place us onto another path – preparing the way of the Lord: the voice of the prophet in Isaiah 61, the prophet quoted by and embodied in the prophet/Messiah Jesus:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me: to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners

That prophetic voice, the Spirit of Christ, is speaking today – together we must listen around us, among us, within us, for the healing that comes from these 4 stunning statements:

good news to the oppressed; bind up the brokenhearted; liberty to the captives; release to the prisoners

- let us not despise the words of the prophets. AMEN.