



SWEDENBORG CHAPEL

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The Words of the Lord

Sermon by Rev. Kevin Baxter
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Readings:

Luke 4: 14-21

Acts 6: 8-15 & Acts 7: 54-59

One of my favorite stories from college is from one of the most significant influences of my life, Dr. Steven Cooley. One day in class, he was telling his students about a panel of people who gathered to discuss who is the historical Jesus. This group takes as a presupposition that the gospels are not word-for-word literal reports but are stories recited by believers and eventually written down. Inevitably, they claim, through this process of being told and recorded, things were added or changed. From professors of history to linguists and clergy people, the group meets to try to determine what is historically accurate in the Bible and what Jesus really said.

From What Dr. Cooley told me, I have come to believe that the weakness of human desire has lead us astray, even in modern times. He said, people in these conferences are given voting cards: yes, no, and possibly. They will discuss a topic with various people presenting on it and then decide if the words or biblical concept is “true” in an historical sense. I was told, however, that much like modern government, peo-

ple had certain sentences or facts they wanted to see be deemed historical. Meanwhile, there were other facts they did not really care as much about. In breaks, at lunch, between meetings, people would politic and trade votes for the various things they valued. What we are talking about in this story is truth by agreement.

I wonder what the Lord or Steven would say about such a method of defining truth? Well, I do not actually wonder what either one of them would say because I believe I know the answer. As Martin Luther said as the majority told him his idea of truth was not correct, “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.” The life of a prophet, the life of a person speaking truth is a lonely one. But, as Emma Goldman reminds us, “every effort for progress, for enlightenment, for science, for religious, political, and economic liberty, emanates from the minority, and not from the mass”.

If we take this to be true, the lonely life of the prophet is one of the single most important roles

in society and in history. The prophet risks everything to speak the words of the Lord, often only to be recognized and honored after humiliation or death. The story of Steven is an amazing tale if one takes the time to read the book of Acts. Steven preaches what he believes to the word of the Lord and is attacked and plotted against by the local officials. When asked to defend himself, he does not enter into normal legal discussion; he recites the history of the people of Israel. What clearly makes him meet his Maker is the statement that the Lord does not live in the buildings that man builds in tribute. Though all can see he has a kind and angelic face, he is stoned.

One of the officials, who was present and pleased at Steven's trial, was a man named Saul. Saul had made it his mission to root out the heresy of Christianity from Israel. While he made no outward signs of these prophets affecting him, I believe they did. For one day, as Saul was traveling, the Lord appeared to him, spoke to him, and made him blind. He went to Jerusalem and struggled for three days before another prophet of the Lord touched him and healed his blindness.

The story of Steven and Saul is a prime example of the way words of the Lord work in the world. Steven had the conviction to speak, though nobody seemed to be listening, but what seemed apparent on the surface was not truly the case. Saul's blindness, if we look at this story metaphorically, was caused by his failure to understand. His sight was granted when he understood.

Jesus tells the people of Nazareth that the prophecies had been fulfilled. If we read on, we see that they did not receive the message either. The people gathered to hear him speak and were freed and were given sight, but they refused to open their eyes at that time.

In a microcosmic sense, each one of us has a prophet inside. Each one of us has a little voice proclaiming the words of the Lord, but the prophet is often silenced. I do not believe that voice of the Lord in our hearts is silenced by malice, but rather fear. To acknowledge error, especially that a fact we have held as truth is in error, is a scary and life-transforming thing.

Some might ask, "I have lots of little feelings and little voices in my mind and heart. How am I to

know what is the voice of the Lord, of my inner prophet?" My answer to that would be to look back at last week's sermon on doctrine or truth, because all prophets teach doctrine and truth, which is charity to the neighbor and love of the Lord. (Rather than wearing bracelets and tee-shirts, I would want glasses that had charity and worship written on them that I might always have it in sight as I go through my day.) If we live a life of charity and worship on the inside, it will be reflected on the outside. If we live a life of listening to our inner prophet, our outer prophet will shine.

There is a book on preaching called *Saved from Silence*, by Mary Donovan Turner. Sadly the book at my school was used as an introductory preaching book, when it really should have been

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used as a book for more advanced people. The ironic titled of the book, *Saved from Silence*, was written for people who speak, preach, and proclaim more in one year than most people do in their lives, but the author was worried about her readers being silenced. Turner believed that preachers, like everyone, could not speak their inner voice, could not speak their inner prophet. She cites fear as a major reason, but she also speaks of our minority, our individualism, as something we are scared to risk.

My first response was, "What are you talking about! I never silence myself from saying the things I want to say! I have none of this fear you speak of." In my book review, I attacked and tore the book apart. By the end of the class, I understood what the book was talking about.

I was on a journey in that preaching class. The bit of truth was presented to me in a loving and caring manor, and I refused to see it. Was it fear or pride? It might have been both, but I sure felt admitting fear or pride would show weakness -- even when I did not see it. Only after my journey was complete did my eyes get opened. Only after I stoned my professor's book did I understand. After the class was over, I went up to her and apologized for the paper I wrote.

Her response was basically, "I knew the second I read your paper that you would look back on it as a mistake, and most do". Like Steven, she knew that people did not like her book and her message at first, but it was a message that needed to be said and it was a message that needed to

stew before the reader was given sight.

All of us have truth to share inside of us, what is holding us back? Each of us has a love of the neighbor and of the Lord, what is keeping us from sharing it? What is it that keeps us from shouting the Lord's Words, the messages of Love and Truth each one of us has inside, to the world?

"What is your place of comfort that you are being called from? What will it take for each of us to risk saying what the Lord calls us to say?"

Moses would say it was because he was slow of tongue and Paul would have said it was because he was getting old. Yet, despite their reasons, they were called beyond their place of comfort. None of the prophets have ever really wanted to do what they were called to do, but they were called from their place of com-

fort. What is your place of comfort that you are being called from? What will it take for each of us to risk saying what the Lord calls us to say? On NPR the other day, there was an author who said he likes to look at risk as a bit of extra life. In times when people take a risk, life becomes more vivid and, well, worth more. I believe this is true when we take a risk that spreads the love and truth of the Lord. Unlike the historical Jesus movement, my notion of truth is not always based in historicism; my notion of truth is based in the Way and the Life that is truth. My notion of truth is one that rests in true reality: is it loving or not? If one is moved to speak or do something that is loving, the Words of Lord have been found. What words of love will you speak or do this week?

Amen.

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