

THE HOMETOWN PROPHET

Luke 4:14-30
Matthew 25:31-44

Washington Pavilion
Sioux Falls, SD
October 26, 2012

I greet you in the name and spirit of the Risen Christ. The same Christ who promised, "I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:36) I am Bishop Bruce Ough, the bishop of the Dakotas-Minnesota Area of The United Methodist Church. It is my honor to participate in this service and to preach the Gospel.

South Dakota has lost one of its beloved sons of the prairie. Our nation has lost one of its true heroes and patriots and an unwavering, clarion voice for peace, justice, compassion and decency. The world community has lost a champion and friend of the poor and hungry. The People of Faith have lost a mature disciple of the Gospel of Jesus and a follower of the Methodist way of life – to do no harm, to do good and to stay in love with God.

The McGovern family has lost a beloved father, grandfather, great-grandfather, uncle, cousin and in-law. We extend to you our deepest sympathy and our pledge to hold you in our prayers as you move through this season of sorrow. You have embraced and endured, with remarkable dignity and charity, a very public season of grief. Thank you for once again sharing George with a generation that also grieves with you.

On behalf of a profoundly grateful United Methodist Church, who proudly claims George Stanley McGovern as a son and example of our Wesleyan heritage of personal holiness and social holiness, I thank each of you for coming today to celebrate and honor Senator McGovern's life and witness. I thank you for coming today to share the McGovern family's grief. I thank you for coming today to say goodbye to a dear friend, a political colleague, a trusted mentor, a global statesman, a servant leader, an advocate of the least of these, and as Vice President Biden said last evening, "a good and decent man."

George McGovern was often and rightly characterized as the prairie populist. The geography and culture of the prairie formed him, as it has many of us, to embrace the common person and to tirelessly work for the common good. But, George McGovern was also a prairie prophet. He was a hometown prophet. In the tradition of the Judeo-Christian prophets, he called and inspired an entire generation (including me) “to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:86) He focused the world’s attention on the plight of the hungry. He warred against evil and fought for peace. He called us to repent of misguided, wasteful and selfish decisions and to turn back to seeking and speaking the truth. George McGovern embraced as his own mission, the mission of Jesus – the mission Jesus articulated in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth:

“to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

The story from the fourth chapter of Luke’s gospel is instructive regarding the role of the hometown prophet. We can learn much from Jesus’ experience of calling the people to embrace a mission of bringing good news to the poor and liberating the oppressed.

As Jesus began his ministry of teaching and preaching in Galilee, he got rave reviews. He was filled with the Holy Spirit. He was praised by everyone. His preaching was over the top. He hit it “out of the park.” In his hometown of Nazareth, the proud eyes of all in the synagogue were lovingly, expectantly fixed on Jesus as he read from the prophet Isaiah. He had come home to share his personal mission statement with his hometown congregation. He declared: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” This was Jesus’ inaugural address.

All spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words. Can’t you just hear their delighted and proud expressions: “Isn’t that Joseph’s son? You know, Joseph and Mary’s kid. It’s good to have him back home. He reads so well and says things we like to hear. You know, he has done

alright by himself; he created quite a stir with his work over at Capernaum. We know this guy. He is okay.” In today’s vernacular, Jesus was a smash, a hit, a rock star!

But then things went terribly wrong, very quickly. Jesus just tells a couple of stories to illustrate what he has read from the prophet Isaiah and all of a sudden all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They drove him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff to kill him. Now that is an incredible reaction to a sermon. A reaction I hope will not befall me today! This was one of their own, one of their favorite sons. In their minds, Jesus’ preaching went from outstanding to outlandish to outrageous in just a few minutes.

What happened here? Quite frankly, Jesus picked a fight. He picked a righteous fight. Jesus took up the tradition – the words from the prophet Isaiah – which they all knew, which they all loved, which they all affirmed, which they all felt were their own, and he reinterpreted the tradition in a way that ultimately infuriated the congregation. Jesus picked a righteous fight.

We have all had experience in picking fights. We all know how to pick a fight. If I asked you to pick a fight with a person seated next to you this afternoon, you would know exactly what to do. You would probably attack their sense of self-worth, their sense of security, their sense of being in control, or their sense of identity. This is exactly what Jesus did with his hometown crowd. “The Day of the Lord is here!” Jesus announced. “Amen,” they shouted. “All of our waiting for deliverance is over,” they shouted. “The Lord is coming.” Jesus continued. Again, they shouted, “Amen! At last the Lord is coming to redeem his own!”

But then Jesus attacks their sense of well-being; their sense of being in control of God’s word; their sense of God’s predictability in their lives. Jesus reminds them of the story from their history – which they have conveniently forgotten – that during a time of drought in Israel when there were lots of poor, hungry people, God sent the prophet Elijah, not to the people of Israel, but to a widow woman in Zarephath – a foreigner, an immigrant. Imagine that! In effect, Jesus was saying, “Do you remember that story?” And the hometown crowd grew silent.

And then, as if to rub it in, Jesus reminds them of the story when many in Israel had leprosy and God sent the prophet Elisha to heal Naaman, a Syrian army officer – another outsider, another foreigner – rather than all those poor, deserving lepers in Israel. And the silence of the hometown crowd thunders into rage. It is the rage of being judged by God’s Word. It is the rage we feel when an exciting, new sermon suddenly becomes recognized as an old story we already know and wish we could forget.

Let’s be honest this afternoon. We don’t much like to be reminded of that which we know is the truth! That which we know is just! That which we know God requires of us! But, that is the role of the prophet, isn’t it? And that is what Senator McGovern did for our country. In his humble, plain-talking and profoundly courageous way, he time and time again reminded us by word and deed what God requires of us.

The people of Nazareth who first greeted Jesus with, “Amen!” finally yelled, “Kill him!” because he painfully reminded them of what they already knew; namely, that God is free, alive, gracious beyond the bounds of our willingness to accept. The worshipers at Nazareth knew that God had cured a Syrian army officer through Elisha, and they knew God had blessed an undeserving widow through Elijah’s ministry. But it was a lot more than they wanted to remember, and they certainly did not come to church to be reminded that God refused to play by their rules before, and might well refuse to play by their rules again. Don’t you hate that? I hate it when God doesn’t play by my rules!

Friends, this is the key to preaching and living the gospel with integrity – remembering God doesn’t play by our rules. God, in Christ, is always turning things upside down! God, in Christ, is always healing the nations. God, in Christ, is always siding with the poor. God, in Christ, is always blessing the peacemakers. God, in Christ, is always giving birth to a future with hope. God, in Christ, is always turning nobodies into somebodies. Senator McGovern played by God’s rules! He sought the heart of God and he lived by God’s rules of justice, peace, compassion and love.

The problem the people at Nazareth had was not that Jesus picked a righteous fight. Their problem was not between the old and the new, the conservatives and the liberals, between change and tradition. The problem was between the people of God and their own memory. Prophets often cut so deeply not because they predict the future or tell us what we don't know. Prophets like Micah, Isaiah, Elija, Elisha, Jeremiah, and Jesus dig around in what we already know all too well and turn that on us. And when they do, there is a moment of dead silence when the smug satisfaction of hearing their gracious words turns to the shocked, silent recognition of having been confronted by God's truth and justice. The prophet has stood up and preached our sermon, the one we know by heart – the sermon we are afraid to speak, afraid to hear, afraid to live.

Often people will say to me after I have preached, "you were preaching to me today." I have started to respond by saying, "No, I must have preached for you today." All I did was call forth and remind you of what you already know. You already know you are to be peacemakers. You already know you are to feed the hungry. You already know you are to clothe the naked. You already know you are to protect the children. You already know you are to eliminate HIV/Aids. You already know you are to house the homeless. You already know you are to welcome the immigrant. You already know you are not to kill that which God has created. You already know you are to liberate the oppressed. You already know you are to do no harm. You already know you are to do all the good you can. You already know you are to love God and neighbor. You already know!

Senator McGovern did not come preaching something new; he came proclaiming something we already knew. In a 1972 speech at the Jefferson-Jackson Day Dinner in Detroit, Senator McGovern, echoing the theme of his Democratic presidential nomination speech and his entire campaign challenged us to "come home...to the ideals that nourished us from the beginning." He challenged a divided and drifting nation to embrace the truth we already knew. Forty years later his words seem as applicable, as prophetic, as they did then. I quote from that speech:

“What is needed is a revitalization of the American center based on the enduring ideals of the Republic. The present center has drifted so far from our founding ideals that it bears little resemblance to the dependable values of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

I want America to come home from the alien world of power politics, militarism, deception, racism and special privilege, to the blunt truth that ‘all men are created equal – that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights and among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’

I want this nation we all love to turn away from cursing and hatred and war to the blessings of hope and brotherhood and love!

Let us choose life, that we and our children may live. Then our children will love America, not simply because it is theirs, but because of the great and good land all of us together have made it.”

And, in perhaps one of the most courageous acts of speaking truth to power we will ever witness, Senator McGovern took to the Senate floor in 1971 and declared to his colleagues and the nation, “This chamber reeks of blood” as he demanded once again an end to the war in Vietnam.

And the prophet was not accepted in his hometown because he told us what we already knew. Others had preached to us, but when Senator McGovern preached for us, for an entire generation, it awakened a nation’s hopes – but also its rage.

You may be surprised to hear a bishop or any religious leader say this, but here it is: you already know all you need to know about religion. If you have been going to church or synagogue or mosque for one year or ten years or twenty-five years or fifty years waiting

to know enough about God so that you can swing into action, I am telling you that you already know enough. And you know, deep in your heart, that you know enough! You know what to do. Jesus reminds us with every story, every parable, every teaching, every commandment. We are to bring good news to the poor. We are to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. We are to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We are to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. We are to visit the sick and those in prison.

I wonder how many people in our great country are drowning in loneliness, hurt, sin, doubt and despair; who are oppressed or hungry or unemployed or do not have health care or access to a quality education while we, who know what to do, do not respond.

Just like Jesus' hometown synagogue in Nazareth, every one of us, of every faith tradition, stands judged by our own familiar stories of faith and transformation – by what we already know of God's saving, healing, reconciling message. Democrats, you already know what to do! Republicans, you already know what to do! Followers of Christ, you already know what to do! Each one of us here this afternoon will be judged by what we already know God wants us to do. Don't take my word for it, re-read Jesus' teaching about the judgment of the nations in Matthew 25.

Here is the good news. We do know what to do, don't we? We know the story of God's grace. We know the forgiveness, healing and joy that are ours. We know that God is unpredictable, uncontrollable and unstoppable. We know that God's grace is not reserved just for us sitting here this afternoon. Knowing is not our problem. Let us not fall silent; let us not rush to kill or sideline our contemporary prophets. Let us be and do what we know. Let us pick a righteous fight. Let us remind the people of this great country what they know, deep down. Let us remind the people of this country what is truth, what is right, what is peace-loving, what is just.

Friends, do you want to truly honor the legacy of George McGovern? Then go forth today and engage the fight for justice and righteousness. Keep picking the righteous fights. You know what to do! Keep up the faithful witness. The world needs your leadership. In the name and Spirit of Jesus, “go get ‘em.” (Amen!)

In 1962, Pope John the 23rd said to George McGovern, then the Director of Food for Peace, “When you meet your maker and he asks, ‘Have you fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, and cared for the lonely?’ you can answer, ‘Yes.’”

Today, we celebrate that George Stanley McGovern is resurrected in Christ and has met his maker. We celebrate that he knew what to do and he did it – with every fiber of his being, with every breath he took, with every word he spoke. Today, we celebrate that George McGovern said, “Yes, I fed the hungry; I clothed the naked; I liberated the oppressed; I beat the swords into plowshares; I proclaimed the Lords’ blessing.”

And, so we as a gathered community of faith and a grateful nation join in saying, “Well done, George. Well done good and faithful servant of the Lord. You knew what to do and you did it. We release you now to God’s everlasting arms. Rest in peace!” May it be so. Amen.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough
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BENEDICTION

Now may the God of peace,
who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus,
and who raised George Stanley McGovern into his eternal and everlasting arms,
make you complete in everything good and just
so that you may do His will,
so that you may go forth and do what you already know to do,
so that you may do what is pleasing in God’s sight,
Through Jesus Christ,
To whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen!