

Sunday, March 4, 2007  
Luke 13:31-35

Lent 2C  
Given by the Rev. M. Peter Harer

As an ordained clergy person, I am called to wear a variety of hats. That just goes with the turf of ordained ministry. The clergy are expected to be teachers, pastors, administrators, counselors, liturgical designers, specialists in church music, youth workers, public relations experts, and sometimes janitors, gardeners, computer technicians and even plumbers. Yet there is still one role of ordained ministry that I haven't mentioned, because in many ways, it contradicts the other functions of ordained ministry. I refer to the role of the prophet. Sometimes a pastor or priest has to change hats and put on their prophet's hat.

A prophet is someone who is called to speak the truth in love. The problem is that many times the truth hurts and we would rather not hear it. I refer, of course, to the truth about ourselves, not someone else. Indeed the reaction that most prophets get to the message they proclaim is that their hearers stick their fingers in both of their ears the way a three year old does when he or she is being scolded by a parent. I think I can safely say that in all the times that I interviewed before parish search committees (Prince of Peace's included), I was never asked how good I am at being a prophet.

That is understandable. No one likes to hear the bad news about themselves. Yet that is what prophets do; they tell people the bad news

about themselves. To a person, I suspect that none of us finds it pleasant or easy to take criticism, regardless of how gently it is given. It is sort of like getting a report card in school or a job evaluation at work. It is painful to read about those areas where there is “room for improvement” in our performance. I can recall taking a preaching class in seminary. I distinctly remember how the professor tore some of my first sermons to shreds. I went back to room thinking that I might as well drop out of seminary because I could never do this well enough. The truth hurt; yet it was something I needed to hear if I was going to improve my preaching. To the extent that my sermons are any good today, Edmund Steimle, my crusty old preaching professor, gets the credit; not me.

It is probably true that most people who are good pastors make lousy prophets. A pastor is someone with good listening skills; someone who projects an air of concern and compassion. Prophets, on the other hand, can come across harsh and abrasive. Good pastors tend to be popular and well loved by their congregations; prophets often don't last more than a year or two. As Frederick Buechner says, “There is no evidence to suggest that anyone ever asked a prophet home for dinner more than once.”

What is clear from today's gospel lesson is that Jesus wore the hat of a prophet as much as he wore any other hat. Oddly enough, some Pharisees,

who were not exactly Jesus' bosom buddies, came to warn him that he had better steer clear of Jerusalem, because King Herod was ready to nail him if he stepped foot in the city. In typical fashion, Jesus responds to the Pharisees by instructing them to "Go tell that fox Herod that I have work to do; and besides, no prophet who is worth his salt is ever killed outside of Jerusalem." In other words, tell Herod to "go fly a kite."

This passage reflects how Jesus was literally playing with fire by telling the truth to the powerful like Herod. He obviously knew this because he was prepared to die once he got to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was both the religious and spiritual capital of Judea, as well as of all that was corrupt and wicked. If Jesus did not go to Jerusalem and confront head on all the forces of oppression and evil, his work as a prophet would not be complete. We all know how that story turned out. It didn't turn out well for Jesus, but it did for us.

Had the search committee from Prince of Peace asked me in our interviews how good I am at being a prophet, I would have had to answer, "Not very." It takes a very unusual person to be a prophet. Jeremiah was one; Ezekiel was one; Jesus was one; Mahatma Gandhi was one; Martin Luther King, Jr. was one. Most of them ended up being killed. The life of your typical prophet is not fun, to say the least. They come to change the

status quo, to undo systems of oppression and injustice; to confront the dark side in human beings. I don't do the prophet well.

Fortunately, the church has the season of Lent built into its calendar. Lent takes some of the heavy responsibility of confronting people with their sins and shortcomings off the preacher's back. So I don't have to stand up here and tell you, as well as myself, that there is room for improvement in our lives, in our relationships with others, in our attitudes toward those who differ from us, or in all the other ways that your life and mine fall short of what God intends for them. Lent does that for us.

Like any process that aims at healing, the process of facing up to our sins and shortcomings can be a painful one. It is painful to have a professor rip your sermons to shreds; it is painful to go to a friend or relative with whom you are at odds and seek reconciliation; it is painful to admit that we may have overreacted or said harmful things in an argument with our spouse. But the purpose of all such pain is a restoration of health and wholeness in our lives, in our families, and in our institutions like the church.

There, now that I have taken a stab at being the best prophet I know how to be, how about we talk about something else? I'm going to put my pastor's hat back on. How are things going at work? How is your Aunt

Susie? How did you make out on your trip to the doctor? How is your Lenten work going? How can I help?