

Birmingham Lecture

Claiming Our Prophetic Voice Evil, Spirituality, & Prophetic Voices

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One of the proudest moments in my ministry came a few days after the attacks of September 11. I watched as more than a thousand people gathered on short notice to form a protective circle around the mosque in Denver. The Denver mosque, like most mosques, had received threatening calls. As we joined hands and formed three enormous concentric circles around the mosque, and as scores of Muslims stood at the front and looked on in awe and gratitude, I swelled with pride. All the regional news media were there, giving our demonstration of support wide publicity. You may recall seeing a photo of the event in the *World* magazine. I was filled with pride because my congregation, Jefferson Unitarian Church, had made this all of this possible. I felt like a proud father because, like most proud fathers admiring their offsprings' accomplishments, the truth was that I had almost nothing to do with it.

One member of our board of trustees, Steve Sealy, was deeply troubled by the reports of violence against innocent Muslims and by news of threats against the mosque. As he sat at home thinking, Steve asked himself, "What would Ghandi do?" He came upon the idea of forming a protective circle around the mosque as the Islamic community gathered for worship. He called me at home that night to share his idea and ask me what I thought of it. I told him I only wished I had thought of it myself. I called another member of my congregation, Chuck Mowry, works as the executive director of the Colorado Interfaith Alliance. Chuck loved the idea and went into action. It all came together in less than 48 hours. The response was overwhelming. Many people could not get to the event because of traffic and parking problems. So many people from all faiths were eager to show that they believe in the power of compassion, hope, acceptance, and openness. All they needed was for someone to take the lead.

A year and a half ago I sat at home tired in the late afternoon, debating whether I should go to a school board meeting. A member of my congregation had urged me to go, because the issue of whether to allow the posting of the Ten Commandments in the schools would be on the agenda. I really didn't want to go, but I couldn't come up with a plausible excuse. I finally dragged myself to the board meeting and signed up to speak during the public comment part of the meeting. I then went to a chair and jotted a few notes. Each speaker was allowed no more than two minutes. As it turns out, I was the only clergy person among the more than dozen speakers. The board, in an act of courage, voted not to allow the commandments to be posted. A reporter interviewed me briefly after the meeting. I was quoted in the Denver Post and a sound bite even made it on National Public Radio a week later. I was ashamed of how close I came to blowing off this opportunity. And I shudder to think of how many other opportunities I have let slip away.

Our communities are hungry for our prophetic voices, for voices of religious leaders that speak with conviction and power in calling us to our best selves. Yet so often you and I are silent. There is so much more you and I could do to be prophetic voices in our communities. What is it that is holding us back?

I know, of course, that there are many reasons. We are busy. Our main responsibilities are usually not in the public arena. Some of us lack confidence and we are not media savvy. Each of us has reasons and excuses.

But I think that our difficulty in reclaiming our prophetic voices goes much deeper. Our difficulty in claiming our prophetic voices has sources deep in our religious heritage and in our contemporary Unitarian Universalist religious culture.

Today I want to explore three pieces of our heritage and culture that hold us back: our failure to take evil seriously, our tendency to separate spirituality and justice, and our fear of power.

Our movement has always done a lousy job of dealing with evil. Outbreaks of evil and violence always catch us off guard. Evil strikes us as an aberration, unnatural, something that mysteriously erupts from time to time. We have always striven to see the good in people. We believe humans are naturally good. We believe that compassion and tolerance are not only worthy ideals, but that compassion, tolerance, peace and understanding are embedded in the natural order of things. We think that things will work out, that humanity's desire to live in peace and in freedom will lead, almost inevitably, to a better future. We are and have always been an optimistic movement. We have always rejected the notion of an evil power that seeks to lure people into losing their souls.

Truly, we are an optimistic and hopeful people. Alas, we are also a bit naive. And, yes, we are often in denial about the evil around us and within us.

Our reluctance to confront our capacity for evil is, I believe, a serious error. Lois Fahs Timmins, daughter of Sophia Fahs, was quoted in the recent *World* cover story on evil. She had this to say about her own religious education: "We spent 95 percent of our time studying good people doing good things, and skipped very lightly over the bad parts of humanity. I was taught not to be judgmental, not to observe or report on the bad behavior of others. Consequently, because of my education, I grew up ignorant about bad human behavior, incompetent to observe it in others, unskilled in how to respond to it, and ashamed of talking about evil."

Our movement on this continent has its roots in the rejection of Calvinism. In their own ways, both our Unitarian and Universalist forebears defined themselves in opposition to the prevailing Calvinism and its dour view of humanity. From its birth in North America, our movement extolled the power of love and the power of reason. Calvin's harsh and angry God was transformed into a loving father. Jesus became an example to follow rather than a blood sacrifice to atone for our sins. Emerson even argues in his Divinity School address that only good is real and that evil is merely the absence of good. For Universalists, salvation was assured. Love's power was irresistible and part of the order of the cosmos. Our founders insisted that we are not helpless and depraved. Each of us is basically good and has the power to choose good.

This is a wonderfully hopeful, inspiring and liberating perspective.

It's really too bad that it is wrong.

How can anyone look at human history and believe that evil is merely the absence of good? We tend to dwell these days on September 11. But look at the last century: the Holocaust, genocide and mass murder in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, in Cambodia, in Russia under Stalin. Look at racism and the array of oppressive isms alive and well all around us. Look at the hatred and violence in our communities. We have dozens of victims of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in this room. We have many thousands of such victims in our congregations. No doubt there are perpetrators of abuse in this room, too.

Anthropologists tell us that when they compile the data on prehistoric human remains found throughout the world they find that one of every four males has died violently. There was no golden age of peace and harmony when we were hunters and gatherers. It is a myth we have created. There is growing evidence that we homo sapiens dominate today because we eliminated other hominids. We are and always have been a violent species.

Evil is real. Evil is a powerful force. Evil is all around us and, yes, the potential for evil lives within each of us. You and I have a dark side. Our collective denial of evil has real consequences.

One of the consequences of failing to take evil seriously is that we are easily lured into a naive complacency. We lose a sense of urgency. When we take the power of evil seriously, we realize that what we do is important. We realize that we are involved in a struggle. Until we confront the reality and the power of evil, we cannot find our prophetic voices. Prophets must have a sense of what is at stake. Prophets have a vision of what terrible things might happen if we fail to take action. If we are to be prophetic voices, we must learn to face evil.

Another part of our tradition and culture that holds us back is our tendency to separate spirituality from the work of doing justice. Yes, our movement can point to many heroes and heroines that have worked tirelessly for justice. We have been active in civil rights and in the call for equal treatment of gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people. We have committed ourselves to antiracism and anti-oppression. The list goes back to abolition, women's suffrage, education, and mental health. All of this is true and we have every right to celebrate this history.

And yet we must also admit that there is a strong current of narcissism and escapism in our history -- a current that is alive and strong today. Imagine for a moment an image of a deeply spiritual person. What image comes to mind? I bet the vast majority of us think of someone in meditation, or prayer, or peacefully drinking in the beauty of nature, or maybe writing poetry. We think of spiritual retreats, of peace, of contemplation. I bet many of us see the spiritual and the physical as opposites. Within our congregations we find that the social action folks and the folks in our groups that explore spiritual practices are two distinct groups of people. What does this tell us about our religious movement?

This culture shapes the formation of our ministry. When I was in seminary there was a dizzying array of options on spiritual practices and spiritual direction. There was at least one course every semester dealing with sexuality and sexual identity. (I wonder sometimes if we have moved from contemplating our navels to shifting our focus to a different part of our anatomies.) There was nothing in the catalog on being an effective public witness or on being an evangelist for our movement. I am happy to say that there are signs of change. I was pleased to see that John Buehrens just taught a course on public ministry at Starr King and that later this spring our Department of Ministry and the Office of the President are sponsoring a workshop on public ministry. We need so much more of this.

More fundamentally, we must resist the separation of spirituality from working for justice. The great traditions from which we draw all refuse to separate the two. Think of the great figures of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Think of Abraham, Moses, David, Esther, Ruth, and Isaiah. Think of the ministry of Jesus. These were not people who spent their existence in contemplation. Their deep spirituality led them to take action and to take enormous risks for what they thought to be the will of God.

The same is true for Mohammed. Even the Buddha felt compelled to reject a life of blissful meditation in order to spread his message of compassion and enlightenment. Thich Nhat Hanh, the eminent Buddhist teacher, tells us that meditation is not an escape from the world, but rather a preparation for reentering the world.

Deep spirituality in all these traditions leads us to experience compassion and deep interconnection. The great religious traditions teach us that if our spiritual practice does not lead us to yearn for justice and to work for justice, it is no spiritual practice at all. If our religion takes us permanently away from the world, our religion is false. It is an idolatry of narcissism, irresponsibility, and self-indulgence masquerading as spirituality.

If you and I are to be prophetic voices, we must insist that deep spirituality and working to transform the world are two sides of the same coin.

The final part of our culture that holds us back is the most troubling and the most puzzling. I believe that we are afraid. We are afraid of being powerful and prophetic voices. We are afraid of growing our movement. Our fear paralyzes us. We turn inward. We lower our voices. That is why airheads like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are eating our lunch. The voices of ignorance and intolerance are loud, clear, constant, and confident.

I honestly do not know what we are afraid of. I wish I did. I believe we need to have a long and deep conversation among ourselves about what it is that we fear as religious leaders.

I do know this: we are paranoid about power. We are afraid to claim power and we are afraid to empower others. I suspect that we are afraid to grow because being bigger could make us more powerful. Our movement cannot help create a compassionate and just society if we are content to be a tiny fraction of one percent of the population. Get real. We are afraid to join hands among our congregations. We hide behind a distorted ideology of congregational polity. Cooperative efforts cannot take root.

I wonder if we are afraid to grow up. There is a kind of permanent adolescence about our movement. We are reluctant to take responsibility. We are a little too self-conscious. We are reluctant to lead. We are afraid to own our power and to use it.

I believe the people in our congregations are way ahead of their ministers. My friend and colleague Don Southworth and I taught a seminar on evangelism in seminary. We have done workshops based on that course at district conferences and at the midsize church conference. Lay people flock to it. They are full of enthusiasm. People in my congregation are deeply appreciative when I get off my duff at speak at public gatherings. People in our congregations want ministers who will speak out for values they hold dear.

The simple truth is that you and I can be much more powerful and effective witnesses for our faith. We can make our prophetic voices heard. We are not being silenced; we are silencing ourselves.

You and I can make a difference in a world that longs for a message of compassion, hope, and justice. You and I can help draw the religiously homeless into our congregations.

If we are to reclaim our prophetic voices, we must confront the reality and the power of evil. We must continue to insist that deep spirituality leads to social action. Finally, we must fear not. We must have the courage to rise above our fears.

When we confront evil, when we fuse spirituality and action, when we put fear behind us, you and I will reclaim our prophetic voices. Our voices will then resound as a powerful chorus across this land. May it be so.

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