

Pentecost II (Proper 5, RCL)  
June 6, 2010

St. Margaret's  
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Once upon a time... *that's a clue that I'm going to tell a story...*

Once upon a time, there was a proud man named Carl who loved to ride his horse through his vast estate and to congratulate himself on his enormous wealth. One day he came upon Hans, an old tenant farmer, who had sat down in the shade of a tree to eat his lunch.

There he sat, with his head bowed in prayer, when Carl came riding along and stopped. Hans looked up and said, "Oh, excuse me, sir. I didn't see you coming. I was giving thanks for my food."

Carl noticed the coarse dark bread and simple cheese that made up the old man's lunch. "Humph," he said. "If that's all I had to eat I don't think I'd be giving thanks!" "Oh, it's quite sufficient," replied Hans. "But it's remarkable that you should come here today because I feel that I should tell you about a strange dream that I had last night."

"And what did you dream?" Carl asked indulgently, if a bit impatiently. The old man answered, "There was beauty and peace all around, and yet I heard a voice saying, 'The richest man in the valley will die tonight.'"

"Dreams!" exclaimed Carl. "Nonsense!" And he turned and galloped away. But as he rode along, he began to muse. "Die tonight? It's ridiculous! No use going into a panic." The best thing to do, he thought, was to go home and forget the old man's silly dream.

And yet... he couldn't forget it. He had felt fine, at least until Hans had told him about that crazy dream of his. Now he wasn't so sure. So that evening, he called his doctor, who was a personal friend, and asked him to come over right away. When the doctor arrived, Carl told him the story; how the old man's dream said that the richest man in the valley would die this very night.

"Sounds like poppycock to me," the doctor said emphatically, "but for your peace of mind, let me examine you." A little later, the examination complete, the doctor was smiling and assured Carl that he was strong and healthy. "There's no way you're going to die tonight," he said.

Just then a messenger arrived out of breath at the manor door. "Come quick," he cried. It's old Hans. He just died in his sleep!"

Prophecy is a funny thing. Not ha-ha funny... but strange and provocative. When one thinks of a prophet, it's generally the image of a seer – someone who can see into the future – that comes to mind. But more often than not, **a true prophet is one who has the very simple gift of seeing**; that is, one who can see what is happening and point to the inevitable outcome. And to many, that sounds like predicting the future.

Many years ago, a priest who was a great influence on my life said to our bible class, "Pray that God does not call you to be a prophet." Why not, we asked him. And he said, "Because nobody likes a prophet."

Even Jesus lamented that a prophet was not honored in his own home.

Prophets, at their best, are those who call us to be better; to do better; to see and hear more clearly. But to do that, the prophet must sometimes point out the problem, which is undoubtedly what makes them so unpopular.

The prophet is the one to shine a light on the dark places. Take Elijah, for example. In I Kings, Elijah is on the run because he has angered King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, for denouncing their sinfulness and disobedience. Not the most politically astute move on Elijah's part, but certainly brave. And there are dozens of examples of such prophets in the Old Testament.

By calling people to be better, do better, and to see and hear more clearly, they are delivering God's message. So God usually has the prophet's back, so to speak, often in the form of the power to perform signs.

So in Luke's gospel, when Jesus raises the widow's son from the dead, the crowd exclaims, "A great prophet has risen among us!" In Jesus' day and time, that was the people's natural conclusion.

In our day and time, we don't generally think in those same terms. What – or who – comes to mind when you think of prophets? Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps? He certainly called us to be better, do better, and to see and hear more clearly the message of God.

There are many others, less well known perhaps, but calling us to see racism for what it is. And there are those who point to sexism and homophobia and age-ism and economic oppression and press us to see injustice and to right it.

Sometimes ordinary people are called to speak a prophetic word now and then. I myself have never aspired to exercise that particular ministry, always remembering the warning from my priest of long ago.

But IF I were to exercise such a ministry today... IF I were to look around in my own day and time and ask how we can be better, do better, see and hear more clearly... IF I were to be so bold as to voice a message from God, a message for myself as well as those who will hear it, it would be this:

WE ARE ENSLAVED TO OUR MONEY AND POSSESSIONS, AND WE WILL NOT BE FREE, WILL NOT BE TRULY RICH, UNTIL WE ACKNOWLEDGE THAT IT ALL BELONGS TO GOD.

And when we acknowledge that it all belongs to God, well, that makes everything different, doesn't it. Then GIVING is no longer giving up something that belongs to us, but becomes an act of freedom and gratitude.

Then our passions and energy aren't given over to protecting what we think is ours, but will be dedicated to discerning how we are to use our resources in service to God's world.

The prophetic word often contains a warning. IF this had truly been a prophesy, the warning would be this: the more tightly we hold onto our money and possessions, the more enslaved and fearful we come.

You have read in your June newsletter what I have written and what Stewart has written – his so wonderfully personal and touching – about stewardship and giving. Your vestry has struggled and prayed and worked to produce their Vestry Stewardship Statement, which was a brave exercise in faith and hope.

As your priest and pastor for yet a bit longer, I can tell you that I don't have to be a prophet to look around and know that many – even in this relatively affluent parish – struggle with money. I know this because *I* struggle with money, and with a constant, nagging fear that there will never be enough; enough money, enough... whatever.

And yet I also know, or at least I am learning to know – with help from my Bill – the freedom of giving. For several years now, I have tithed off the top. Just like most of you, I have a payday twice a month, and my pledge is the first check I write. It is my personal exercise in faith and hope.

That is what I hope for you, too, especially those of you who, like me, don't want to hear this so-called prophesy; who don't want to hear this so-called warning about enslavement and fear.

But I'm reminded of another – very short – story I once heard. It was about a preacher who went to visit one of his church members to ask him to tithe. The church member expressed his reluctance, citing his bills and obligations.

The preacher offered him a deal: he, the preacher, would guarantee to make up the difference if the church member's money fell short. "You'd do that?" the church member asked. "That's what I'm offering," said the preacher.

"Well, sure, then," came the answer. And the preacher shot back, "You mean to say you'd trust me but not God?"

Here's the bottom line, so to speak: God doesn't need your money. What God needs, what God hopes for – for you and me – is our freedom and joy.

So this is my prayer – for myself and for us:

*Lord, help us to hold more lightly that which belongs to you and which you have put into our hands. Help us to live gratefully and without fear and to experience the freedom of giving. **Show us how to be truly rich.** Amen.*

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