

## What is Prophetic Church? Proclaiming Freedom

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This is the second in a series of sermons exploring the concept of *prophetic church*, visionary and bold congregation. By saying *prophetic*, we draw on ancient Judeo-Christian texts of radical prophets with disruptive messages: Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, to name a few from Hebrew Scripture. Last week I said we *all* have the power and responsibility to “co-create what is holy,” as Rev. Meg Riley put it in *A People So Bold*. She wrote that prophetic congregations seek to build communities where all are deeply valued and mutually known, working from a realistic sense of hope, in order to choose life and blessing.

Today we focus on praxis, or practical action, in prophetic work that Dan McKanan explores in his essay in *A People So Bold*. He names *partnership* as central, the act of moving purposefully out of UU-only social justice circles:

*If our Unitarian Universalist faith centers on the religious experience of encounter with other people, then our religious practice must necessarily be one of partnership...*

*Because our history is so rich, it is easy to see ourselves as the ones who already know the path forward to beloved community. [However] Serious partnership requires us to apprentice ourselves...to people who might at first seem too different from us to teach us anything. (From The Sacred Fire, Dan McKanan, in A People So Bold)*

Our UU faith centers on the religious experience of encounter with other people. Both founding traditions include many who functioned as prophets in their time, people who boldly called attention to injustice that others wanted to ignore. Why was this so? Unitarians concentrated on nurturing every spark of the divine within, rather than waiting for an omnipotent God to bring about social transformation. Universalists believed that God would save us all, and this created a powerful sense of solidarity with every person, worthy of grace. Within the eventually merged UU Association, humanists proposed that the only thing that could save us was faith in the best that humans had to offer. Then late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century theologians began to emphasize our relationship in the interdependent web of life, added later as our 7<sup>th</sup> principle.

All four of these streams combine in current Unitarian Universalism social justice theology. The result is that justice is fundamental to our faith--the act of standing for the whole, not just the privileged, or ones just like us. We don't wait for the hereafter, or divine intervention, to feel compelled by our values to take action for ongoing social change.

And still, what we actually do is heavily influenced by who we know, what we hear, and what we see.

The Fourth of July always makes me simultaneously celebratory and unsettled. On the one hand, I truly enjoy the chance to celebrate our national historic ideals. On the other hand, I remain uneasy about all that is left out of the air-brushed red, white and blue panorama that we see during the annual festivities. The Fourth of July is when I feel the most tension between what organizer Saul Alinsky called “the world as it is” and “the world as it should be.” In Washington D.C., 2010, does our city reflect the values of freedom we espouse as a nation?

This week my attention was called very sharply to the “world as it is,” the Washington, D.C. that often becomes invisible. I received a book entitled *In the Shadows of Power*, by photographer Kike Arnal of Venezuela, commissioned by Ralph Nader’s organization. The title sums up the powerful images. Arnal photographed the *other* Washington--not the gleaming Capitol, the Monument and museums, or the hot new restaurants and clubs in the Northwest quadrant. This other city is mostly poor and working class, African-American and Latino, and often south of the Anacostia River. These pictures are of youth in juvenile detention at Oak Hill, heroin addicts, patients in an AIDS hospice, teenagers at the funerals of their peers, homeless neighbors, worn-down people in food lines.

In his introduction Nader tells us:

*[Kike Arnal] walked the streets of Washington that few see, as well as the Washington that over twenty million tourists visit every year. He watched and waited, listened and spoke, inhaled and exhaled the city's tragedies, ironies, glitter and ghastliness, its pride and pomposity, its guilt and its shame. For in no other metropolitan area in the Western world is there less excuse for the poverty, misery, greed, deterioration of public services and powerlessness of the people that grind over the pretensions of its rulers.*

Here are the persistent facts about D.C., in spite of overall economic growth, and in the midst of widespread gentrification:

- Life expectancy is 72 years, behind 120 countries, including Mexico and the Gaza Strip.
- 40% of adults are classified functionally illiterate.
- Fifty-four % of children are low-income, the highest in a U.S. urban area.
- In Ward 7, Southeast D.C. across the Anacostia River, there is an unemployment rate of 30%.
- In Ward 8, also across the Anacostia, there is only one supermarket for 70,000 residents, recently opened with large city subsidies.
- We have the highest AIDS mortality rate in the country, resulting from the highest percentage of those living with HIV-AIDS in any US city.

If we proclaim freedom on this Fourth of July, who is that freedom for? This question brings us back to McKanan's point that "*serious partnership requires us to apprentice ourselves...to people who might at first seem too different from us to teach us anything.*" How might we *apprentice* ourselves--a very intriguing word--to those very different from ourselves? To be prophetic church in Washington, we must be in partnership with this invisible city, outside the walls of this building. The work we do to build beloved community within our congregation must be alongside others not in our UU institutions. Our job is to work for justice *with* those who are different in Washington D.C., to learn together how to respond to the injustices of our day.

Our All Souls Social Justice Ministries often put us in relationship with difference--that we might listen, learn, and act more broadly in this city. In serving lunch at Christ House on Columbia Road, we see and hear the reality of African-American men with chronic medical conditions coming from years of homelessness. At La Clinica del Pueblo we find out about the challenges of transgender sex workers, or young mothers who can't buy medicine for their children. Tutoring ESL students we hear the struggles of an immigrant father. At a Washington Interfaith Network assembly we join with Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, union members, students, day laborers—standing together to ask our Mayoral candidates to end the war of personalities on the campaign

trail. We ask them to take the urgent need for jobs, affordable housing, and youth services seriously.

To give the invisible D.C. maximum resources. To be as accountable on neighborhood investment in poor and working class areas as they are on building tourist sites or sports centers.

When we mix ourselves into the revelations of the daily, messy world, our justice work unfolds organically in relationships. As Dan McCanan puts it, the holy encounters of this faith, Unitarian Universalism, have always been defined more by our understanding of human nature than of God. These kinds of encounters happen more readily in places of struggle than of privilege. Resist the segregating structures, McCanan writes, resist all the places that would keep us divided by identity, or content to be with only the like-minded. Instead, we are called to identify the sources of love in our own lives, to better hear the voices of others outside our congregations. We proclaim freedom, and we mean it to be for everyone.

May we be apprentices to the unfamiliar. May we live our way to being prophetic church in Washington D.C., one relationship at a time.

Amen.