

The reward of a prophet

Whoever welcomes you welcomes me. Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.

After Jesus shared with his disciples a little of what they could expect as they go from village to village, he turned it around and reminded them to be open and receptive to those from outside their circle who would be bringing *them* the gospel. Imagine that...at this very moment, most of the people who even know about Jesus are right there in that little circle. How on earth could others carry the message to *them*?

Jesus said to them, *whoever welcomes you, welcome me*. But they too would find new evangelists and unfamiliar prophets in their midst, and if they weren't ready receive them properly, then they would miss out on something important. *Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.*

Along the journey of your life, whether on your way to another village or here in your home town, you will encounter people who are truly righteous: you are to recognize that wonderful grace and integrity in them, and endeavor to pattern your life after that. You will encounter prophets as well, and they will question everything you fear; they will challenge everything you hold dear. How you receive those prophets is how you receive me.

So keep on your toes. The charge we are given is to “welcome the prophet *in the name of a prophet*,” which really just means recognizing a prophet for who he or she is, and realizing that prophets are part of how God keeps the community true. We need the challenging word, we need the witness of these meddlesome voices lest we become a static, closed, self-satisfied bunch. The Christian life is a continuous process of refinement and reform, and we need those outside voices who disrupt our comfort to keep our faith authentic and alive.

Before the prophets came on the scene, the people could only look to their priests and to their kings to understand what God was up to. Kings, they often thought, were divinely appointed, and priests offered sacrifices in hopes of a fruitful harvest. But just like today, kings and priests had a curious way of getting

into cahoots with one another. I think the modern word would be “enmeshed” but frankly I like the word cahoots better.

But in the Hebrew tradition, there was another voice, a shrill voice crying out in the wilderness, a voice that no one in power or with privilege wanted to hear. Yet they spoke with a distinct authority. The commandments of God resonated through the words of these troublemakers. They spoke out not just because the Kings had become power-hungry while the people cried out....they spoke because just about everyone had lost their way.

When the very possibility of living righteously came under the assault of the empire, when their commitments to their neighbors became forgotten, de-prioritized, or simply made “quaint,” the prophets spoke up. When those who held power, or just quietly benefited from it, began to re-calibrate the moral thermometer down to their own comfort zones, it was the prophets who called them back.

Jesus said, receive these prophets as bearers of the Gospel, too.

If you want to learn about the prophets and what they were up to, then Walter Brueggemann is the guy to read. In 1978 he wrote *The Prophetic Imagination*, where he argued that the Hebrew prophet’s job was to imagine and proclaim the alternative community to which the faithful are called. The more we listen to the prophets, the less we trust the world we’re supposed to take for granted.

Brueggemann wrote that “the task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke ... an alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.”ⁱ That means that the prophet makes *all* of us angry because he or she isn’t here to tweak the system, to make *the same, only fairer*, but to disrupt entirely a world that is fundamentally lacking in justice and righteousness. And that, in so many ways, is what Jesus was doing. As Cynthia Bourgeault said, Jesus wasn’t here to download an upgrade, but to switch us to a different operating system entirely.ⁱⁱ

Maybe that’s hard to hear, or maybe it’s liberating, but the important piece for us is that Jesus told us to listen to those who bear that difficult message, because to welcome them is to welcome him.

The good news is, we get a reward! Whoever welcomes the prophet, receives the prophet’s reward. That sounds nice at first, until we think about what prophets tend to get rewarded with. At worst, true prophets are met with violence. Or – as

anyone who's spoken out before knows – they get alienation and ridicule. Or they simply get managed.

But the reward is richer than you might think. One more thought from Brueggemann: the prophet does two distinct things in calling forth an alternative consciousness. One, of course, is to criticize and dismantle the powers that be. But their work doesn't stop there, because the next task is to *energize the new community* by guiding it towards what God envisions for them. ⁱⁱⁱ

The reward of the prophet, then, is the *energy* of new life! The rewards come in the form of hope, and imagination, a wholehearted life, an awakened heart. The rewards come as a lively compassion – and to prove that these are not just words, Jesus speaks of the cup of cold water given to one who thirsts as a tangible, almost sacramental, sign of a righteous life. The rewards are this incredible relationship with God, one founded on deep fidelity and true joy. The reward of the prophet is life itself.

Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me. And when you welcome the righteous, the prophets, the little ones seeking a cold cup of water, you welcome me as well. Your reward will be the community that God has envisioned for you. Your reward will be holiness and grace.

Homily for July 2, 2017, The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Year A, Proper 8, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina.

ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter, *The Prophetic Imagination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress, Press, 1978). 3.

ⁱⁱ Bourgeault, Cynthia, *The Wisdom Jesus*. (Boston: Shambala, 2008).33.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. 3.