

HOSANNA PREACHING SEMINAR REFLECTION

I arrived for my candidating weekend at First United last summer. The Pastor Nominating Committee had planned a Congregational Breakfast, where the floor would be open for anyone to ask me questions. Prior to arriving, the PNC warned me, “be prepared for Pauline Coffman. She will want to ask you about your position on Israel. But remember, there are people in our congregation who feel passionately on both sides!” It turned out that Pauline was much more measured and less predictable in her questioning, and that my stand on the Cubs-White Sox issue was much more controversial than anything having to do with the Middle East, but the impression remained that First United is a church that holds convictions very deeply, and the Middle East is one of the most polarizing subjects. Consequently, when Ms. Coffman approached me about participating in the Hosanna Preaching Seminar, I leapt at the chance.

Strong feelings within the congregation were not the only reason for my enthusiasm. The fact is that, though the Middle East is a subject of great interest to me, I have never really taken the issue on from the pulpit. Though I have traveled there and considered many archaeological and historical subjects related to it vital to my work in ministry, I have never considered myself sufficiently informed to speak out on contemporary issues. At the seminar, Pauline’s initial talk on language helped me begin to think about why I had avoided the subject so much in the past. I discerned that my reluctance was rooted in language and inclusiveness. As a Presbyterian, I have always valued John Calvin’s emphasis on the authority of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and embraced his thought that, “the grace of God revealed through the people of Israel is the same grace revealed in Jesus Christ.” As a result, I have spent most of my years in ministry combatting the Marcionite tendencies of many Christians and wrapping myself up in the many images, metaphors, and phrases associated with Israel. Together with Walter Brueggemann’s Chosen?, Pauline’s comments, and the myth-busting discussion on congregational push-back, I began to recognize how much I had allowed language and a desire for humility and inclusiveness to excuse me from speaking on an important issue of social justice that goes to the very heart of our faith.

Combining such thoughts with my personal experience (contained within my sermon notes) and the diversity of perspectives, passionately held, within my congregation, drew me inescapably to the Isaiah lectionary passage. There, the prophet gazes at the abyss that exists between the Israel of his day and that Israel of God’s hope and vision, and utters the words, “I will not keep silent.” To imagine Isaiah, torn between his love for Israel and his commitment to his prophetic office, the idea of being “chosen” moved from calling to critique, from identity to challenge.

The opportunity to spend a day in conversation with the men and women assembled for this seminar was both inspiring and humbling. Paradoxically, it both revealed my relative ignorance in the face of such expertise and compelled me to speak out more. To my delight, the congregation has responded with great enthusiasm.

Sermon Outline, John E. Cole
First United Church – Oak Park, IL
1/17/16
“I Will Not Keep Silent”
Isaiah 62:1-7 (John 2:1-10)

At first glance, this appears to be just another prophecy praising Israel, lifting up its special relationship with the God that we worship. God’s covenant, for all generations, celebrated, honored, and glorified. Not much else to talk about.

After all, it is an exalted position I have been taught to respect my entire life. Growing up by the ocean in Florida, my church was surrounded by four synagogues, each less than a mile away—one orthodox, one conservative, one reform, even a messianic temple. In elementary school, we learned the dreidel song right alongside Christmas Carols, the menorah as prominently displayed as any crèche. Middle School was filled with opportunities to attend the bar mitzvahs of my friends and basketball teammates. By the time I got to high school, the films they showed us in school assemblies depicting the horrors of the Holocaust were not shocking, because the story of our Jewish brothers and sisters had been told all our lives.

Just over the bridge, we were learning of another community in our midst. They surrounded Bethune-Cookman College, the proud institution of higher learning founded by the civil rights pioneer Mary McCleod Bethune, her towering statue welcomed us to a world of African-American achievement that, for most of us, existed beyond our reach and experience but in which we still were taught to claim and take pride. Three parallel communities, existing side by side, rarely intertwined, but raised to acknowledge one another and “be nice.” This was the meaning of tolerance, of respect, of Christian piety and love that formed my earliest memories.

When it came to the Bible, we were equally nice. Stories of Exodus and the Wedding at Cana smoothly connected to an ethic that embraced the freeing of slaves after the Civil War and a triumphant march through Europe to liberate concentration camps. The nobility of nonviolent resistance and grim survival were the heroes of those groups we allowed to partake of the American Dream. The land of the free, where we managed to celebrate inclusion and pluralism while mastering the art of sanitized lives, gliding along in separate lanes and contexts.

It only took one trip to the Middle East to shatter my illusions that I had any clue of what pluralism really involved. It left me with images that have shaped my understanding and approach to texts like Isaiah for the rest of my life; examples of extreme piety and extreme hatred—that paradox that many Americans have become all

too adept at masking behind polite conversation and dulling indifference. There is a raw honesty in the relationships and lives of people there that strips away boundaries and exists in your face.

I have thought often lately of my time in Syria, where the streets of Damascus were filled with women making the pilgrimage to the Umayyad mosque to mourn the death of the Shi'ite martyr Hussein. Most of them were covered from head to toe in black burqas, refusing to bare even the slightest hint of skin amidst the scorching heat. In nearby Maaloula, Christians persevered in a dominant Islamic culture governed by a police-state. Tourist police met us at the Jordanian border, we passed camps of Palestinian refugees not far from a laughing group of Western clad Jordanian school girls. Mosques built on churches built on synagogues on ancient pagan ruins. Women shopping in Jerusalem malls with rifles strapped to their backs, the Western Wall and the barbed wire and poverty of the West Bank. On and on it went.

The climax came for me in Jerusalem, where every city block spoke of the energy, devotion, and diversity of three great religions. At least, until one day when we found ourselves deluged by a sea of blue and white flags with the Star of David. There was joyful singing and dancing, and a stage was set up for a concert with security guards all around. People were laughing, families were relishing the moment, and we were passed by wave after wave of merrymaking celebrants. It was fun, and you felt this desire to sing and dance and clap right along with them. Yet, as the parade careened through the streets of Jerusalem, it occurred to me that it was winding its way through the Muslim Quarter. I looked beyond the revelry to the shops and apartments that lined the road. In an instant, my mood changed, as I saw the downcast faces of somber Palestinians. For over a thousand years, these streets had been theirs. Even after the creation of Israel, this part was still supposed to belong to them. I asked a Palestinian shopkeeper, "Why are all these people parading through the Muslim Quarter?" "Because they can," was his quiet reply. "Do they do this often?" I asked. "Whenever they want to," he noted with an air of contempt. "How can we make things better?" I inquired clumsily. "I do not speak English," was his curt response.

Of course, he spoke English just fine. What he did not speak was the white, Southern male American I had been so blithely fluent in up to that moment. All those Old Testament prophecies that had once been so clear gave way to the multi-layered quality of the texts that hold tensions in balance and resist reduction, so much like the Middle Eastern hostilities from which they spring.

The book of Isaiah is a very good example of this. To understand Isaiah, you have to come to the text first considering which Isaiah it is that you are reading. Most

scholars believe there are at least three different Isaiahs embedded within its verses, so expansive is the historical backdrop of this prophecy. By the time we arrive at Isaiah 62, we have come to a place in Israel's history when it has been to hell and back—facing the consequences of its failure, destruction, and exile, and now preparing to be restored to the Land it once ruled, a land that has become a barren and desolate wasteland. It's right there in the text—where God looks forward to the day when Israel will no longer be termed Forsaken and Desolate.

In other words, this prophecy is aspirational: it speaks of an Israel that God longs for, to become that shining city on a hill and beacon to the world that God first envisioned when God decided to love Israel. Yet, what is inescapable in that hope is the unavoidable truth that Israel is not that—even now—and that those who would twist the idea of Chosen from a calling to exceptionalism take something hoped for and twist it into a privilege above blame.

Yes, God “delights” in Israel—not the one that exists, but the vision of what God's people can become. The covenant God made with Abraham was universal and unconditional. The covenant God made with Moses—the covenant that involved the Land itself—was conditional, predicated on a society that exhibited *mishpat* and *zedek*, justice and righteousness. It was always conditional, always in jeopardy, and was even lost...more than once. So, today, we must ask ourselves, does Israel appear to be something that God would delight in? Can we be content to support, unconditionally and uncritically, actions of a government as though they are immune, even when God says through Isaiah, “for Zion's sake, I will not rest. I will not keep silent, as long as the Land remains forsaken and desolate?”

I get it. I know all the arguments for inaction...I've made them myself. Treasuring our relationships here at home, we are loathe to damage them for the limited impact we can have abroad. Yet, I imagine my predecessors in Southern pulpits in the Sixties, with all of their carefully cultivated relationships in country clubs and civic groups, believing they could do more good preserving those relationships than by speaking out against segregation. With Judaism, our guilt is compounded by feelings that we would be trading a miniscule impact for lasting damage to inter-faith relationships that feels arrogant and paternalistic, especially given our Western history of anti-Semitism. Because if we can't fix it, if we can't control the change we seek, it is much easier to just throw up our hands...and be nice. That's often how white privilege works, infects, and erodes, never imagining what James Cone could have meant when he said in seeking racial justice, “do you think we are trying to fix things? That we hope to win? No, we are just seeking to dig some dignity out of the dung of our existence.”

At some point, you begin to realize, this is not about picking your battles or being fair and balanced. It is about justice. It is about complicity. Holding inter-faith relationships hostage to honest dialogue brings into question the foundation of those relationships, especially as God declares, “I will not keep silent.” It calls into question our understanding of church and witness, the very purpose of our existence.

While I was a pastor in Florida, I served on the executive committee of a community organizing group, and at our annual conference, they asked me to speak alongside the African-American pastor of another large church. Unfortunately for me, he got to speak first, and told a very moving story about how he became a pastor. He had been in law school in Colorado when he received a call that his nephew had been murdered in suburban Los Angeles, and that his family was having difficulty recovering the body from the local police. With others, he tried desperately to move the situation, but no progress was made. At one point, the local police chief defiantly challenged him, saying, “what are you going to do?” And he replied, “I’ll tell you what I am going to do: I am going to leave law school, come back there, and start a church.” And that is exactly what he did, starting a church that effected lasting change in his community.

When he was finished, I knew my notes were useless. I cast them aside and said that I could not imagine such a phrase coming out of my mouth. “I am going to come back there, and start a church.” No. Maybe, “I am going to pick up the phone and make a call.” Surely, I know someone on the city council or school board or hospital board who can fix this thing for me or one of my members. Preserving those relationships so that I can leverage power to help someone out...just be nice.

Too often, the Church is content to focus on building community without being prophetic, to cultivate relationships as though they are value-neutral in order to avoid judgment. But is it enough to sit in Exile while the Land is barren and desolate? Isaiah says, “you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.” A mouth that cannot be silent with a Word we are called to proclaim.

Here at First United, we have a chance to be that kind of church. We celebrate the fine wine and community of a Wedding at Cana, but miss that the very next scene involves flipping over tables in the Temple. Here is a place where all are welcome, yes, but we cannot rest, we will not keep silent, as long as God’s people remain in a forsaken and desolate land, whether in the Middle East or on the streets of Chicago. If that is the church you seek, then come, be a part. Let us seek justice, and be silent no more. Amen.