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**Prophetic Preaching in a Pastoral Mode:  
Communities of Solidarity and the White Mainline Church  
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Much discussion of the prophetic in Christian preaching has presupposed a substantial gap between preachers as prophets and the communities with whom they engage. In a prior essay, I argued the “lone ranger” model of prophetic preaching played an inordinate role in the way the white mainline church in particular has conceived the prophetic task.<sup>1</sup> While this misconception was built on very individualistic assumptions about prophecy, a review of the shape of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible and Early Christianity brought out the importance of communities in prophetic work and discernment, as well as the place of covenant in the former and ecclesiology in the latter. The prophetic is emphatically not a lone ranger enterprise.

One of the great scholarly contributions of the work of my colleague, Dr. Dale Andrews, has been to flesh out this community character in more profound ways. In this book, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, Andrews calls specifically for a deep reconciliation between the prophetic and the pastoral.<sup>2</sup> His book seeks to find a way forward between the liberationist and prophetic claims of black theology and the refuge-oriented, more individually and spiritually shaped view of African American folk religion. Andrews does not view these two traditions as utterly bifurcated. In fact, he thinks a focus on the praxis of the African American church will yield space where the linkage between the prophetic and the pastoral can be explored and claimed. Overarching this careful discussion is a conviction that the pastoral concern of the refuge view of salvation and the prophetic view of liberation need each other in the same

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<sup>1</sup> David Schnasa Jacobsen, “*Schola Prophetarum*: Prophetic Preaching Toward a Public, Prophetic Church,” *Homiletic* XXXIV:I (Summer, 2009), 12-21.

<sup>2</sup> Dale Andrews. *Practical Theology for Black Churches*. Louisville: WJKP, 2002. What follows is my partial summary of his work.

intimate way that the twin sources of covenant theology in the Hebrew Bible do: (1) the Sinaitic covenant, grounded in the sovereign God of exodus who gives a covenantal law of liberation to which the prophetic tradition calls to return and (2) the Davidic covenant which is grounded in God's commitment to institutional presence and dynasty. The two covenants need each other. In the same way, Andrews hopes to have African American religious communities see that the individual call to personal salvation cannot be cut off from the history of liberation in which it finds itself. The most effective form of prophetic preaching therefore finds its strength in just such a covenantal awareness precisely while grounding a powerful sense of personal presence in living commitment to social justice. In this way, the prophetic call is grounded in a gospel of grace, repentance, and reconciliation. Andrews hopes to reconnect the prophetic and pastoral again.

In the same spirit, I wish to explore more deeply what brings the prophetic and the pastoral together and precisely as an instantiation of a more communal sense of prophecy. I do so with some trepidation. The problems around reconciling the prophetic and the pastoral in preaching vary considerably across communities, their privilege, and their positionalities. The reconciliation of the prophetic and the pastoral in the pulpit of white mainline denominations like mine calls forth a different set of acknowledgments, a different kind of reflection, and a different kind of praxis. This chapter honors the work of Prof. Andrews by posing a question: how can a new discernment of solidarity, that is, what and who gets noticed, eventuate in a different conception and praxis around the relationship of the prophetic and the pastoral in preaching itself? Can it do so in a way that presses past the obliviousness of those who, enmeshed in privilege, too often fail to notice injustice and struggle to make a deep connection between themselves and others?

## Noticing and Obliviousness in the White Mainline Church

The way in which “noticing” and “not noticing” complicate the move toward the integration of the prophetic and the pastoral is quite clear at the level of the wider culture. In *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky demonstrate that media news crises are used to further policy objectives.<sup>3</sup> They point out that political agendas especially impact the selection or amplification of a given story in the media. It is not uncommon that officials will seize upon an event in order to sway sympathy in order to advance an agenda. This is also true in crisis moments where governments prioritize appropriate victims. Herman and Chomsky write,

“Our hypothesis is that worthy victims will be featured prominently and dramatically, that they will be humanized, and that their victimization will receive the detail and context in story construction that will generate reader interest and sympathetic emotion. In contrast, unworthy victims will merit only slight detail, minimal humanization, and little context that will excite and enrage.”<sup>4</sup>

The point is that at the level of public media, we are already being shaped to notice and not to notice.

At the level of community practice in churches, this becomes all the more prominent. In a powerful ethnographic study of a multi-racial church that intentionally includes and engages persons with disabilities, Mary McClintock Fulkerson begins to trace through the thematization of her own habituated, bodily reactions, how white racism shapes interpersonal relations and even sponsors a kind of obliviousness. A priori commitments to “color blindness” and pretending not to notice real bodily differences show that such obliviousness reaches deeply into experience, especially the experience of the privileged. Part of the problem of reconciling the

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<sup>3</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 32. In this section of the book, Herman and Chomsky analyze public crises like the shooting down of the Korean Airliner by the Soviet Union in 1983 as an example of how selectively noticing helps to foreground certain public sympathies.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

prophetic and the pastoral in white mainline preaching concerns just this gap: noticing and not noticing human beings and the ideologies and habituated values that render some people oblivious and others invisible.

I select this example for a very personal reason. It was while reading McClintock Fulkerson's work that I became aware of the ways racism had shaped my own perceptions and embodied reactions. Whatever prophetic preaching does, and whatever way in which the prophetic and the pastoral can be related in such an act, will deal ultimately with the impediments to the gospel posed by injustices as they already impact preachers and hearers at the level of perception and practice.

At the same time, and here I also remain on a very personal level, the possibility of noticing is a small first step that can open up different ways of doing prophetic work. After a trip to Denmark, Prof. Andrews told a story about how amazed he was to see these words spray painted on a building in Copenhagen, "I can't breathe." The reference is to the words of Eric Garner as he was placed in a life-ending chokehold by police in New York for selling loose cigarettes. I wondered, as I heard Prof. Andrews recall this story wistfully, why he had to travel so far to find a European culture that was able publicly to notice, to name the deadly truth, and show some small modicum of solidarity. The bad news is that US white mainline churches largely failed to notice and demonstrated little solidarity. The good news, albeit small, is that someone in Denmark did.

My contention in this essay is deceptively simple. If the prophetic and the pastoral are to be reconciled in white mainline prophetic preaching, it must do so recognizing this particular element of privilege: the uncanny ability to escape notice, to be oblivious, and to *fail* to show solidarity across the artificial lines of culturally inscribed power relations. I write this to set an

agenda for a pastorally-oriented form of prophetic preaching in the white mainline church: it needs to be in the business of fomenting not only a more communal sense of the prophetic, but of care and solidarity as well.

### **Fomenting A Communal Prophetic Vision Open to the Pastoral:**

#### **Walter Brueggemann and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza**

To my mind, Walter Brueggemann contributes to just such a vision with his unique take on the prophetic—and one that acknowledges the importance of the pastoral along the way. In *The Prophetic Imagination* the problem is precisely a crisis of consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary church, whether left or right, is captive to consumerism. The right reduces prophecy to future predictions about Jesus, the left lives in an eternal present focused on “issues”, critiquing but never engaging beyond their thematization in the prophetic pulpit.

For Brueggemann, therefore, the problem is that the church is captive to the dominant imagination and needs to remember its own tradition to see differently. This “seeing” has two elements relative to the dominant consciousness: critiquing and energizing. Critiquing is an act of dismantling the dominant consciousness. Energizing means to articulate a hope toward which people can live, one capable of sustaining an alternative consciousness in the present by pointing to a future. Precisely this critiquing and energizing is the stuff of prophetic ministry. For Brueggemann, it is this dialectic which allows hearers to be faithful to God.

For Brueggemann, a Hebrew Bible scholar, Moses is the paradigmatic prophet who sought to evoke just such an “alternative consciousness” in Israel. Pharaoh’s religious system is one of static triumphalism built on the politics of oppression and exploitation. It can permit no

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*. (Rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001). A summary of Brueggemann’s position follows.

newness. It is what is, was, and ever shall be. It is a world that cannot be critiqued and also cannot energize, merely enslave. For Moses to critique this world is more than just thematizing issues, but to show such status quo gods are in fact no gods. As an alternative, Moses discloses the freedom of God which he crucially joins to a politics of justice and compassion. Exodus' "alternative consciousness" produces then a new social community that corresponds to this vision of divine freedom.

Of course, such consciousness raising is both a prophetic and a pastoral act. Part of the critique is to demonstrate that Egyptian Gods cannot deliver on their promises. But part of the critique is also the cry, a word of lament. The people of Israel groan under their bondage...and God hears it. Then God remembers God's covenant. Brueggemann says that the real capacity to criticize resides in the ability to grieve. The Empire wants everyone to think it's all OK. The grief, and its public statement, put the lie to that and thus open the possibility of critique. For they are complaints that expect answers—they know something is wrong, because it is not as promised.

I would like to submit that such communal prophetic vision is intertwined with care in different ways. For all the benefit of Brueggemann's understanding of a debilitating royal consciousness which stifles grief, not everyone hearing such a prophetic word suffers in the system in the same way. If the prophetic imagination helps us to see pastoral care as a deepening of the sense of grief in moving from "royal" to "alternative consciousness" of Exodus, some of us need to acknowledge positions of privilege within the pyramidal system of Egypt. The Pharaonic power structure crushes Hebrew slaves, but others stand in differentiated relationships to system of power. This, to my mind, complicates the pastoral work of grief in Brueggemann's communal prophetic vision. And yet part of Brueggemann's vision holds: "only grief permits

newness.”<sup>6</sup> But how, given the fact that our connections and relationships to power are not one, but many?

Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza offers a more differentiated way of thinking about power that moves beyond the binary of Brueggemann’s dialectic. She argues in *Wisdom Ways* for what she calls “kyriarchy” as representing a more differentiated understanding of systems of domination. For her, kyriarchy can function diagnostically in that it “allows us to investigate the multiplicative interdependence of gender, race, and class stratification as well as their discursive inscriptions and ideological reproductions.”<sup>7</sup>

The upshot for this communal prophetic vision that includes the pastoral is a way prophetically of naming grief *differently*. Preaching as a prophetic and pastoral work will require an intersectional wisdom and a more differentiated way of naming the very grief that leads to newness by means of the prophetic imagination. These may well be ways of grounding the kind of communal care and solidarity that prophetic needs to name among those who fail to notice and those unduly numbed in obliviousness.

### **Fomenting A Communal Pastoral Vision Open to the Prophetic: Lee Ramsey**

In his book *Care-full Preaching*, G. Lee Ramsey seeks to move the opposite direction: From a renewed vision of communal pastoral care to the prophetic.<sup>8</sup> How does he get there?

Ramsey notes that much pastoral care is dominated by the “therapeutic.” He expresses the concern that the pulpit in particular has been taken over by therapeutic language. Instead of

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<sup>6</sup> This quote comes from the name of a section in Brueggemann’s subsequent work, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways. Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 119.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Ramsey, *Care-full Preaching: From Sermon to Caring Community* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000).

replicating such an individual (and professionalized) orientation to care, the pulpit should actually release the whole people of God to care.

Ramsey wonders just what prevents churches from sharing in such a communal pastoral vision? He notes two problematic theological roadblocks. First is a too narrow theological anthropology. By buying into a therapeutic mindset about care, preachers may just re-inscribe individualistic therapeutic selves in their sermons. In contrast, Ramsey considers that something of our humanity is actually more bound up with each other. Ramsey mentions favorably Ed Farley's interest in "the interhuman" and notes by contrast how individuality in some cultures is actually an abstraction. Second is a woefully inadequate ecclesiology. We are neither merely individuals, nor with a more reified identity rendered as simply apart from the world or over against it. A more adequate vision for a communal vision of care is grounded in an understanding of the church in the world, which still God so loves.

Ultimately, says Ramsey, communal pastoral care is theological. It is emphatically about God's care and its relationship to communities who hear the Word of God. The question is: what to do? Ramsey's program begins by noting that, for good or for ill, the words of preaching form pastoral communities, not just atomized caring individuals, or re-inscribed clergy-focused, professional care. In fact, Ramsey argues that homiletical representation of care in sermons should reflect that pastor is *not* in charge of caring, but allows the congregation to care.<sup>9</sup>

This, to my mind, actually has prophetic implications. Prophetic preaching in light of Ramsey's vision of communal pastoral care is not limited to clergy professional interventions, nor to culturally bound forms of therapeutic individualism. Ramsey puts it this way:

Communal care rests on the theological conviction that world and church, individual and society, are united in God's Kingdom; all express the fullness of creation that God intends. To heal the world is to heal the individual in the world.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 56.

To express care within the church is to contribute to the wider environment of care that extends to the end of the earth. This why distinctions between pastoral (inward) and prophetic (outward) are not only incorrect but counterproductive within the caring community of the church.<sup>10</sup>

A communal vision of the pastoral, by virtue of a vision of the pastoral as the life of a caring community, leads naturally to the prophetic.

### **A Communal Vision for Solidarity:**

#### **Uniting the Prophetic and the Pastoral with Sharon Welch**

The problem, of course, is that the natural is anything but inevitable. The history of the white mainline church, and its own need to unite the prophetic and the pastoral through a more communal vision of both, stumbles precisely at this point and threatens in the midst of its failure to remain oblivious and to re-inscribe the powers that be. For this reason, we move here toward a deepened communal vision for solidarity as a means for exploring places where the prophetic and the pastoral might intersect concretely. To do this, we turn specifically to the work of Sharon Welch in *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*.<sup>11</sup>

In her book Welch aims to account for both the reality of liberation and the reality of ecclesial failure that accompanies it in practice. She wishes to see communities as places where resistance and solidarity are born and become the both the source and the means of grace by which such communities engage the world. For her, solidarity is not just an add-on to traditional theology, but a starting point in practice, a critical principle for purposes of social critique, and an “*impetus for political action.*”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 132-33.

<sup>11</sup> Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 46.

Failure for Welch is real, but not inevitable either. Christians in community need to acknowledge that solidarity has not always been. This, however, is not a matter of theological necessity, but a result of “the fragility and the unpredictability of the historical process itself: the possibility of the failure of a genuinely liberating ideal, or the oppressive impact of an ideal that is ostensibly liberating.”<sup>13</sup>

What happens in such communities of solidarity and resistance is a living liberation faith in all of its ambiguous and fragmentary power. It is able to produce an “awareness of a liberating God who evokes solidarity with other people, an affirmation of the significance of human life and thus protest against suffering and oppression,” even while “the reality of that God is called into question...in light of the barbarities of the twentieth century: the holocaust, Vietnam, Hiroshima-Nagasaki, sexism, racism, the nuclear arms race, the torture of political prisoners.”<sup>14</sup> Communities of solidarity bring with them entailments that already begin to open up possibilities of new perception, critical principles for theological work, and the very sustaining empowerment of grace that sponsors liberating faith in the midst of struggle in practice. This reality of communities of solidarity Welch attributes to grace and relatedness:

The symbolic language of grace is appropriate at this point: the ability to love and to work for justice is something we are given through the power of community. An attempt to bring justice does not make sense as an abstract imperative or judgment outside of this communal context. Within a liberating faith, we find social structures that mediate the divine and enable solidarity, rather than an abstract call to justice. The imperative of justice is motivated not by guilt or duty, but by love, by the power of relatedness.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 67.

Such communities are for many reasons places of struggle. However, a communal vision of the prophetic and the pastoral, in deep connection to communities of solidarity, explore at the level of practice and begin to name possibilities of liberating faith in struggle.

### **Conclusion**

For this reason, I aim to emphasize that in taking up prophetic preaching and pastoral care, especially in contexts of privilege, communal visions need to be grounded in an ever-wider arc of solidarity. Two of the key theological principles that guide my course in prophetic preaching read like this:

5. Prophetic preaching is not solely the prerogative of the clergy, but a manifestation of the ministry of proclamation that is given to the whole people of God. The Spirit which is given with the prophetic Word is given to all God's people, not just the clergy. This also means that the prophetic Word should rightly aid God's people in becoming who they are already in Christ.

6. Prophetic preaching emerges not solely from anger, but also from a pastoral articulation of human grief and loss experienced in the presence of God in Christ as disclosed in the cross. Pastoral solidarity is its common ground, a solidarity which joins together hearers by means of their shared pain, visible and invisible, connecting them to each other and the world God loves so much.

These principles for prophetic preaching in the white mainline church are modest. Still, a move toward a deeper sense of relationship between the prophetic and the pastoral can help foment a more radically communal vision of both, grounded graciously in communities of solidarity for whom that solidarity is a practice, a fund for critique, and the gracious means of prophetic care. Such a move holds the promise of breaking through obliviousness and bearing witness, even if in fragmentary ways, of God's intentions for humanity and creation in just relation.