

“Backyard Prophet”
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
1 Corinthians 13.1-13
Luke 4.21-30
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Prophets have sometimes been confused with fortune tellers. It is thought that prophets can tell what will happen in the future - and when our future isn't what we want it to be, those prophets are usually blamed for it. Prophets in scripture are less fortune tellers and more truth tellers. They look at society, at the world and events around them, and call out systemic evils. Perhaps the part that is often mixed up with telling the future is when prophets give cause and effect. This is often framed as in “if you keep doing this, a consequence will happen.” It's less about knowing the future, and more about knowing either cause and effect or how history repeats itself. They are usually “if, then” scenarios.

My family's favorite prophet of sorts right now is Bruno from the Disney movie, *Encanto*. If you haven't seen it, I hope you'll check it out - I'll try not to give away any spoilers. *Encanto* is about a magical family in Colombia. This family was given a miracle when all hope was lost. Part of that miracle is that each member of the family receives a gift. For example, one aunt controls the weather with her emotions, another can heal physical wounds with her homemade food. These gifts enable the family to support the community and care for one another.

In *Encanto*, the uncle, Bruno, was given the gift of prophecy. Sometimes he leaned toward fortune teller, like when he told two community members that they would end up with a bald head or a gut. These people saw these as prophecies but perhaps he just understood that genetics plays a role in these things. In most of his prophecies he could see the consequences of certain actions if people continued in their behavior. The people had little awareness that they actually had agency to change these prophecies in the future - he merely gave them some guidance of what would happen if they continued in the path.

Because Bruno spoke hard truths, he was feared and misunderstood. Prophets are rarely welcomed because they are often speaking truth to power. They are calling for people to change, which is never easy. Prophets in their own homes are even more feared. Bruno's own family didn't even talk about him because they didn't take the time to understand him - there's an entire song called “We don't talk about Bruno.” One line in the song is “your fate is sealed when your prophecy is read.” Everyone in the song felt a helplessness when Bruno read their prophecy – and so they froze instead of seeing it as a warning of inaction.

I think fear and misunderstandings have often led us to what I'm going to call “Encanto Syndrome.” It feels safer to not talk about something. We think it's kinder if we don't mention that we disagree. We have been taught that rather than disrupt, we shove our thoughts or feelings beneath the surface. Rather than disagree, we quietly rant and fume. If something feels off, it isn't talked about in public spaces.

This has perhaps led to the state of the world as it is now - one in which people don't know how to productively disagree with another - one in which threats are made, people are yelling, and conversation doesn't happen. Our world suffers from Encanto syndrome and people become isolated. When we become isolated and don't talk, we assume and fume, further separating ourselves from one another. Pandemic hasn't helped with this because we found ourselves isolated as we tried to stay home to stay safe.

We haven't learned how to speak with love. The first Corinthians passage is one that is often used in weddings because it talks about love. But love is more than just a ceremony or a wedding or a feeling on one day. It's just more than a feeling it's an action. Love is something we need all the time. This passage reminds us that we can do all of the things that require justice and action. We can be a disciple and feed the hungry and care for one another but if we don't have love we are not truly making a difference.

This doesn't mean that we don't walk through the motions of times. I think sometimes the mere motivation of trying to do better can stir within us the reminder of God's love. Sometimes just showing up with no expectations means that God will meet us there and remind us of that deep love that we have been shown. Showing up in worship, grumbling at the world, but ready to receive God can soften our hearts a bit. Showing up at the table, with mixed emotions, but with open arms, means that we can feel that love and begin to let it transform us.

If we think we understand the world, if we think we understand God, if we have all the knowledge of the world, as first Corinthians suggests, but don't have love, that knowledge means nothing. This past week I spoke with the college Interfaith group about Gnosticism and the non-canonical gospels. I have always found Gnosticism interesting because it includes stories that are not identical to the Bible but turn our own knowledge of the Bible upside down. For example, in the non-canonical book, the Gospel of Judas, Jesus actually tells Judas to betray him – his action is out of love instead of greed. For me, I don't hold this story as a fact, but as a reminder that I don't know everything about the Bible. It is easy for us to judge biblical characters, or humans in our lives, but we have to remember that we don't have the whole story. We don't know what they are going through. We don't know what someone said to them earlier that day. We don't know if they're in pain. The love often reminds us to have compassion.

As part of the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program and community organizing I spent time this week talking with civic leaders in this community and others. The one theme I heard over and over again is that humans are not loving one another very well right now. Love seems like such a simple thing, but so many of us still struggle with this.

Love does not mean kindness all the time. It doesn't mean happiness it doesn't mean joy. Sometimes love means doing hard things because you care about someone. The gospel passage reminds us that Jesus acted out of love but sometimes it was not well received. Sometimes we have to offer love with a word of rebuke.

This brings us back to our Encanto syndrome. The gospel reading is directly after what we read last week. Jesus has just told the crowd that he is the one that the passage speaks about. He is announcing that he is the messiah. He tells the people he is the one that has been called to

save them. Their first response is recognizing that he is Joseph's son. They might be in a little bit of shock but also just recognizing that they know him. There are probably conflicting feelings about this announcement. What would you feel if the kid you grew up babysitting announced she was the Messiah? And maybe this conjures up memories of him as a child toddling around Mary's knee. Perhaps it reminds them when he scraped his elbows outside. Maybe it reminds them of the times that he messed up.

I mentioned briefly last week that it is possible that Jesus was not a perfect child. Another one of the non-canonical gospels describes Jesus as a child. There's one in which he comes upon his powers and harms life. For obvious reasons this wasn't included in the canon. But we don't know what Jesus was like as a child because that story was left out. The crowd doesn't seem to be disapproving at the moment that Jesus is speaking but when he begins talking about changing the society. New Testament professor, Gay Byron writes: "They could now see that the message of Jesus was not simply a seal of approval but rather a message that threatened to dismantle the status quo and the stereotypes that defined the religious and social boundaries of those in the synagogue."¹ It can be difficult for someone who grew up in a town to speak truth to power. Perhaps that is the most difficult piece of being a prophet. The people have to see the change and receive the change. And that is not always easy. I think perhaps when someone from that town, or system, comes in a criticizes the system, but has also benefited and participated in that system, it is difficult for others to hear.

This is the world in which we live – one in which we must be changed within, by God's Spirit, and to encourage change around us, speaking with love. If we speak without love and try to make changes, and don't change within, we're just a noisy cymbal – a performance. But if we work within ourselves, and admit that we are also making mistakes and learning along the way, we can do this together.

Speak with love, know with love, act with love – and be loved by God, the Creator, Christ and Spirit. Amen.

¹ Gay Byron, "Luke 4.21-30" in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 313.