

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 24, 2016

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 4:14-21

REFLECTION

“How long shall they kill our prophets while we stand aside and look?”

– Bob Marley, Musician

Going Mental

This morning we have a prophetic text from Isaiah being read by Jesus during the Sabbath service – and translated for us by Carrie. It’s a positive, inspiring text – but that’s only half of it. Jesus tells the gathered congregation that the prophet’s words are fulfilled (implicating himself). And they are filled with admiration for the son of Joseph who is exceeding expectations.

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

But THEN he starts to actually do the proclaiming and preaching. AND he criticizes them – his own neighbors and the people he grew up with. Before they’ve even had a chance to reply he says a rather snarky thing:

24... "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown..."

Now there’s a self-fulfilling prophecy! THAT’s when his home-townies get mad.

28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

Their reaction may seem a bit extreme by our modern standards. But the penalty for blasphemy in those times was death. And someone claiming to be a messenger from G-d and then insulting the congregation could be considered a blasphemer – twisting G-d’s words for self-promotion and the degradation of other G-d-fearing people. Then again – they’re kind of proving his point by their actions. Hurling someone off a cliff is a clear sign of non-acceptance.

It is also a way to force Jesus to prove himself. If he really is G-d’s anointed he will not be killed by the fall. You may have seen Monty Python’s movie “The Holy Grail” – in which a woman accused of being a witch is being submerged in water. If she’s

innocent, she'll drown. If she's a witch, she'll float and survive – to be burned as a witch. We call that a Catch-22. So Jesus survives the crowd's intentions and walks away – only to be hunted down 3 years later and crucified for blasphemy. Go figure.

One might say that the congregation in Nazareth went crazy that day. But one might also recognize oneself in the crowd. There was a woman on Dr. Phil this week (not that I ever watch Dr. Phil) who claimed to be G-d's anointed. Her family brought her to the doctor to help her deal with her mental illness and get help – while she just wanted them to leave her alone to do G-d's work. For television purposes they made a deal out of her praying over roadkill in order to bring the animal back to life. And her husband defended her, claiming she had cured him of his homosexuality. When he said that, I made my judgment and knew she'd gone mental – and so had he.

But who are any of us to judge whether someone claiming to be working for G-d is crazy or not? There was a gal in one of the previous churches I served who proclaimed from the pulpit to be Karen Christ (name changed to protect the prophet). She wanted people to come live with her in community and do good things for other people. She was off her medication at the time – but who's to say she was wrong or crazy?

An article entitled *“Rethinking Mental Illness: Are We Drugging Our Prophets and Healers?”* by Vironika Tugaleva raises some questions for us as we try to work out the best response to those in our midst who are “not normal” and yet contribute new perspectives – even healing – to our communities.

Our mental health care system is breaking people. We have no room for the sacred, only normal. The narrow range of accepted behavior expected from us is more oppressive than you might realize. That is, until we experience beyond it, until we get judged, until we don't fit in, until we need fixing...

We're taking people with a completely different perceptual experience and calling it “wrong. We're weeding out our geniuses. We're killing off our prophets. We're drugging our messiahs...

When someone is physically ill, we take pains to expose them to society; when someone is mentally ill our goal is to ostracize them. How can we recognize the healers in those who are, themselves, healing? How can we learn to see beyond the categories we created and gaze, instead, into the beautiful glowing orbs of consciousness that defy categorization?...

Honestly, I don't know. I don't. But this is not really about answers. This is about questions. I read in an old book once:

“Confusion is the beginning of wisdom.”

Not knowing is the beginning of knowing...

Our inability to think differently about mental illness no one's fault, but it is our responsibility. We can all come together and decide to do better. We deserve it.

<http://highexistence.com/rethinking-mental-illness-are-we-drugging-our-prophets-and-healers/>

In the time of Isaiah – and later in the time of Jesus – mental illness was considered to be either demon possession or G-d possession. There were no medications and the idea of a chemical imbalance in the brain would have been anachronistic. Over the ages there have been numerous prophets, artists and geniuses who would have been considered mentally ill by modern standards – people who never “fit in” to their society, who heard voices and saw things, who committed suicide or self-injured or became alcoholics or drug-addicts in order to cope with their lives. But they also created unimaginable works of art, invented things that are now part of our common life, wrote poetry, became world renown actors and comedians, founded alternative societies, changed the world irrevocably.

We are currently blaming mental illness for many of the mass shootings that regularly happen in our country now. I can see how that can be construed as “demon-possession.” Those who destroy the lives of others must be restrained in some way – physically or chemically.

But there are just as many who are destroying the lives of others who are in elected office or board rooms of corporations – and we are not as quick to judge them mentally ill or restrain them.

And then there are those who are relatively harmless – or those who are incredibly creative and interesting and unique – who are living on the street or in poverty or in their parent's houses – who have something important to contribute to the conversation, to our common life.

Jesus was homeless – arguably by choice – had one or two sets of clothes in a backpack and that's all. He lived on the kindness and hospitality of others. He hung around with other homeless and outcast people. He had a unique perspective on the status quo and had some criticisms for the powers that be. He was attributed with healing powers – both physical and spiritual. He told stories that didn't necessarily have a logical ending or an ending at all. He stole a donkey and talked to women on

the street. He heard voices, saw visions, thought of himself as anointed by G-d – in the tradition of Prophets – and perhaps Cynics.

And people who imitate him today are relegated to the loony bin.

“Beyond Blue” is an online depression support group hosted by Therese J. Borchard. In an article on BeliefNet.com she talks about that “Fine Line Between Prophetic and Crazy.” She asks:

Am I psychotic or spiritual?

One of the first psychiatrists I saw would vote psychotic. As I rattled off a few of my thoughts—most of which pertained to God’s unique calling for me, and the ways he had revealed his message through signs and symbols throughout my day—she told me I was making connections where none existed and much of my spiritual jabber was a symptom of hypomania. It may have been.

I mean, I recall thinking almost everything that happened to me in my day was a sign from God. The fortune cookie I got (*Since when did those things turn negative??? I’m so not going to that Chinese place again*) during this psychic phase read: “You are in over your head. It’s time to seek professional help.”

So I went a little give-me-a-sign-and-please-create-my-destiny-because-I-haven’t-a-clue-as-to-where-I’m-going crazy. But I’m not about to throw out Baby Jesus with the holy bath water, either, because I do believe, as loony as this sounds, that God has commissioned me with a purpose, that He communicates through people, places, things, and randomly mean fortune cookies. I try to be as receptive as possible to picking up on those clues.

<http://www.beliefnet.com/columnists/beyondblue/2010/06/are-you-spiritual-or-psychotic.html>

Being Christians in America in 2016 – being slightly counter-cultural and prone to helping people in need – being actors and writers and artists and activists – having a unique perspective that is a bit jarring to people from the Midwest – does this mean we’ve gone mental? I lived 40 years of my life un-medicated with what came to be diagnosed as an anxiety disorder – with mood swings, times of both depression and euphoria – even physical nerve pain – and a lot of life decisions made out of fear. But I also wrote songs and poetry, had an intense desire to engage in social justice activities – and felt a huge spectrum of feelings that made life interesting and volatile.

I have been on medication for close to 20 years now – with a reasonable explanation of why my great-grandmother committed suicide, my grandmother drugged herself to death, my aunt and mom and sister struggled like I did. I have learned what “appropriate emotional responses” are to life situations and maintain better boundaries. And I have fewer anxiety attacks that won’t allow me to leave the house or pick up the phone. But I am also writing less poetry, closed off to part of my emotional spectrum, less sensitive to the feelings of others, and get less done each day without all that adrenaline, my previous drug of choice, pushing me. I haven’t been arrested for protesting in decades – unlike Jean Koch and my Dad. And it feels like I’ve lost something – even though I have also gained a more reasonable life – including a family.

There are trade-offs for “going normal.” And there are trade-offs for “going mental.” We can say “All prophets are crazy people, but all crazy people are not necessarily prophets.” And those among us who are deemed sane are not necessarily so.

This biblical text may seem to point to Jesus as the Messiah to follow. But it also points to that thin line between congregation and mob, between spiritual and homicidal, between prophetic and psychotic, between “normal” and “mental”.

We walk those lines daily. So do homeless people, rich and poor people, politicians and the “religious.”

It may behoove us to pay attention to which side of that line we are walking at any given moment – and reserve judgment of those who seem to be on the other side.

Let me close with my favorite passage from a book I read in High School: Moby Dick by Herman Melville. I assure you, my madness will make sense eventually.

But it so happened, that those boats, without seeing Pip, suddenly spying whales close to them on one side, turned, and gave chase; and Stubb’s boat was now so far away, and he and all his crew so intent upon his fish, that Pip’s ringed horizon began to expand around him miserably. By the merest chance the ship itself at last rescued him; but from that hour the little negro went about the deck an idiot; such, at least, they said he was. The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of

the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. (93.13)

<http://www.shmoop.com/moby-dick/madness-quotes-2.html>

Scripture Reading for Sunday January 24, 2016 – Epiphany 3 – Year C

Luke 4:14-21

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4: 21-30

21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." 22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

23 He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" 24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. 25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; 26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. 27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.