Lift Every Voice

4 Pentecost (Proper 8)

July 2, 2017

Jeremiah 28:5-9 [Psalm 89:1-4,15-18](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/Aprop8_RCL.html#ps2)Romans 6:12-23 [Matthew 10:40-42](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/Aprop8_RCL.html#gsp1)

Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.”

Gee, thanks a lot, Jesus.

The prophet Jeremiah’s “reward” was abuse, slander, and persecution by his people; some of those whom Jeremiah criticized plotted to kill him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The prophet Amos decried Israel’s arrogance and hubris; he especially attacked the king. Here’s Amos’ “reward”: he’s betrayed by a priest to the king.[[2]](#footnote-2)

I’ll be honest with you: I have very little idea of what Jesus means when he tells the disciples “Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.”

A footnote on this verse in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* says this: “the prophet is equivalent to God, who has sent” the prophet[[3]](#footnote-3) and “Jesus’ disciples are like the prophets.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

OK, that helps, some. But it still doesn’t tell us what the prophet’s reward is.

Reflecting on this verse, I started to feel like a dummy. But when I looked further, I found that I may have good company in my dummy-ness: neither Mark nor Luke has this statement of Jesus in his Gospel. Maybe they too had no idea what Jesus meant, so they left his words out of their narratives.

We Christians, we human beings, tend to press “Delete” when we hear or read something we don’t understand. When we Christians, we human beings, hear something that challenges our long-held—and therefore, of course, absolutely correct—views, we tend to cover our ears and go “La la la la la.”

But let me share with you one thing that I think is absolutely central to the Christian life, something you may not have heard before.

No, I’m not talking here about the Trinity or Baptism or the Eucharist.

Now, before someone brings me up on heresy charges, let me emphasize that I’m *not* saying that the one thing I’ll talk about is the *only* absolutely central requirement in Christianity.

Let me put it this way: Imagine a circle. The circle is Christian faith and belief. Now put what’s absolutely central to Christianity in the circle. God is at the center; all around God are things like the Trinity and Baptism and the Eucharist. And, I would add, community, compassion, forgiveness, social justice, and many more.

Last week in her sermon Cindy gave us a homework assignment. Let me offer one now: sometime this week, sit in quiet for a few minutes; on a piece of paper draw a circle; label it “Christian Faith and Belief”; now write in it what is absolutely central *to you* about being Christian.

Don’t worry: this assignment won’t be graded.

By now you may be saying, “OK, preacher man, get to it. What is this thing that you think is absolutely central to Christian faith and belief?

Here it is: in my circle I’ve written in boldface “Willingness.”

Being willing means being open: open to new people, open to new ideas. Not shut in and barricaded but open and receptive to learning more about yourself; being open to new truths about ourselves, truths that often require course correction or even a new roadway.

Open especially to what confronts and challenges our long-accepted views; open especially to hard truths that tell us things we don’t especially want to hear. Being open, like Abraham, to welcoming in these new truths and inviting them to sit down at dinner with you. Perhaps you’ll even need to ask a new truth to stay with you a while so you can absorb and learn on a daily basis.

Just as important, willingness is being open to what prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos are telling us.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, puts it this way:

To believe that the world can change, that God can turn history on its pivot, is to believe that in all sorts of human situations it is possible for things to be different. And I think that’s the basis of all the ways in which Christians are regularly and systematically a nuisance to people who want a tidy world.[[5]](#footnote-5)

I’ve just finished a book by Jim Wallis, whom many undoubtedly consider a nuisance but whom many many others call a modern prophet.[[6]](#footnote-6) Wallis, an Evangelical, founded the Sojourners community and magazine back in the ‘70s because he saw that Evangelical Christians—and, let’s be honest, most Christians—were ignoring the prophets’ and Jesus’ teaching about God’s requirements of justice, peace, and equality.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The book is *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Wallis’ prophetic book challenges the heart and soul, the very being, of what it means to be an American with our 300-year-old history of slavery, racism, discrimination, violence, and segregation. He opens the book with the violent and bloody attack on a Bible-study group at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in 2015.

That massacre was two years ago now. But Wallis, book in hand, still prophetically stands in the marketplace, proclaiming God’s truths to a people who often have ears to hear but do not listen.

Why does Wallis’ book matter? Here are three reasons:

1. Most churches in the United States are still highly segregated. The Episcopal church is 90% white, 4% black, 3% Asian, and 2% Latino.[[9]](#footnote-9) St. Paul’s, thank God, does not match those numbers.
2. A new study demonstrates that it wasn’t economic insecurity that prompted many people’s votes for president, it was instead “racism and racial animus,”[[10]](#footnote-10) that is, racist attitudes towards those who are “other,” different, the stranger, the foreigner.
3. With our prison-industrial complex, the United States leads the world in imprisoning its own citizens. As Wallis points out, our prison system “is systematically racialized in its implementation.”[[11]](#footnote-11) One scholar recently termed our morally bankrupt prison system “the new Jim Crow.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

As Christians, followers of Jesus, we need to hear these hard truths. Then when we hear, when we really listen, we need to *do* something.

Wallis has one great advantage over the biblical prophets: unlike them, he does not call down God’s wrath on a rebellious people. He is not a prophet of fire and brimstone; rather, he is a prophet of action: forceful, yet peaceful, action.

Wallis is not a prophet of despair and resignation. Where, then, lies his hope? Where, then, lies *our* hope? As a person of faith, this modern prophet calls on us “to repent from our original sin of racism.”[[13]](#footnote-13) We must, he says, go to a “morally deeper place.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

That deeper place must lie open to repentance. Repentance, Wallis insists, “is not just expressing sorrow or admitting guilt; it is about turning completely around and going in a whole new direction.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

So, individually and as a nation, if we repent and confess our racist sinfulness, what, absolved, must we do with our new direction?

First, I would suggest that each of us memorize what Jesus says in Matthew 25:35-36; each of us should tattoo it on our hearts and emblazon it in our souls:

I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.

Sojourners has a web page where you can sign up and take the Matthew 25 pledge. I urge each of us to do so.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Second, we need to ask: How can I, how can we, feed the hungry; how can I, how can we, welcome the stranger; how can I, how can we, clothe the naked; how can I, how can we, care for the sick; how can I, how can we, visit the prisoner?

Third, and this now gets political, we must ask *why* are people hungry, homeless, unclothed, sick from lack of health care, and unjustly in prison?

Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

As Wallis emphasizes, prophets “are prophetic interrogators. . . . ‘Why?’ is the prophetic question.”

Let us lift every voice and ask “Why?”

But let us lift every voice even higher by asking “What can *I* do?” Then let us lift our voices as a chorus, as a prophetic choir, and work together at St. Paul’s to implement God’s loving desire for redemptive, restorative, distributive justice.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Amen.

1. Jeremiah 11:21-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amos 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Exodus 16:8; 1 Samuel 8:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 5:12; 11:9; 13:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rowan Williams, *The Sign and the sacrifice: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Wallis>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://sojo.net/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [https://www.amazon.com/Americas-Original-Sin-Privilege America/dp/1587434008/ref=sr\_1\_1?s=books&ie= UTF8&qid=1498918874&sr=1-1&keywords=jim+wallis+americas+original+sin](https://www.amazon.com/Americas-Original-Sin-Privilege%20America/dp/1587434008/ref%3Dsr_1_1?s=books&ie=%20UTF8&qid=1498918874&sr=1-1&keywords=jim+wallis+americas+original+sin). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.thenation.com/article/economic-anxiety-didnt-make-people-vote-trump-racism-did/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wallis, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow:* *Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Wallis, xvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wallis, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wallis, 57-58. The New Testament word is *metánoia*, “‘a transformative change of heart; especially: a spiritual conversion.’ The term suggests repudiation, change of mind, repentance, and atonement; but ‘conversion’ and ‘reformation’ may best approximate its connotation” (Wikipedia). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. <https://sojo.net/matthew-25-pledge>. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. On distributive justice, see the work of John Dominic Crossan, for example *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)