

The Cross and the Wedgeblade

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on the Second Sunday of Advent
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Last week I encouraged us to look at Advent as a season, a theological concept, and a life experience. As a season it is those few weeks leading up to Christmas. As a theological concept Advent is oriented to the future as it announces the potential in-breaking of God into the world. As a life experience it is that moment when we are intensely aware that we are between what is and what will be.

This morning I want to challenge us with the idea that we as the people of Shadow Rock are an Advent people. In our guiding Covenant we state that "Our task together demands a comprehensive view of life, always pointed intentionally to the future." Please note our task together is not to invite, consider, mull over, or think about a comprehensive view of life. Our being together and working together demands a comprehensive view of life.

A comprehensive view of life is not an option.

A comprehensive view of life is a viewpoint that is not exclusive of the past but neither is it confined to the way we have always done things.

Our viewpoint is to be oriented to the future.

Our comprehensive view of life is an Advent view of life.

As our comprehensive view of life is historically grounded and yet future oriented we have two very important symbols on our communion table to help us maintain balance; the Cross and the Wedgeblade. This is not to be confused with the 1970 film "The Cross and the Switchblade" starring Pat Boone. I am talking about the Cross and the Wedgeblade, and I want to use these two symbols to explore the idea of prophecy: specifically, prophetic source and prophetic outcome.

I want to make sure you hear the word correctly. I am speaking about things that have to do with prophets and prophecy. I am talking prophetic, not pathetic. What comes to mind when you hear the words prophet, prophecy, and prophetic? End times? Wild eyed yelling religious fanatics? Nostradamus? Edgar Cayce?

When I use the word prophetic I am not talking about the stereotypical image in popular culture of a person who is crazy, disheveled, disconnected from the mainstream of society standing on the corner of a

street shouting about the doom and gloom of the end of the world. Neither am I talking about the quieter version of someone who predicts the future.

When I use the word prophetic I am talking about the central thread of the Judeo-Christian tradition which challenges a people of faith to be more faithful. Sometimes the challenge was to the whole nation and sometimes it was specific to the political and religious leadership. Regardless of the target people it was always a call to justice believing that living as a just people was the better reflection of God's nature than pious words and actions. I want to also add that no matter how stern, direct, and judgmental the message of the prophet it was never limited to the negative. The complete message always contained a word of hope and I believe the completeness of this message is the mark of a "true prophet".

Let me also state that while I often limit myself to the prophetic tradition of the Judeo-Christian faith, I do not believe that the Word About Life is limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Islam and Hinduism informed Gandhi as he spoke against British Imperialism. Native American spirituality informed Fools Crow's prophetic word as he spoke against the injustice of American Manifest Destiny outside Wounded Knee. Speaking truth to power is always prophetic and has no religious boundary.

In keeping with this understanding of the word "prophetic", let us look at prophetic source and prophetic outcome.

I think it is important to keep the Cross on our communion table. I acknowledge that it represents for many of our brothers and sisters the old paradigm of blood atonement. It may represent that for some of us here today but I understand that we are moving beyond the old paradigm and neither do I believe that believing the right thing at the right time is a litmus test for faith or salvation. For this morning, let the Cross represent the more complex Judeo-Christian tradition and the idea of prophetic source.

Prophetic source includes those preserved sayings and stories that speak a specific truth to power. The specific truth is one of accountability. A prophetic word is a word that says the poor, the weak, and the marginalized are equal in value and worth to the rich, the powerful, and the mainstreamed. A prophetic word not only calls on justice as fairness but it calls on society to order its communal life honoring such principles of equality.

There are two Golden Rules in operation in our world. One is the one we know from several religious traditions; "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." The other Golden Rule is less known but perhaps more widely practiced, "Those who have the gold make the rules." The prophetic source definitely proclaims the truth of the former over the latter.

While the prophetic source is a collection of sayings and stories of the proclamation of the Word about Life through human history, its authority is not in the specific and particular historic expressions. Its authority lies in a conviction that life is meant to be a certain way and when we order our society in compliance with the intention of life itself then we are being just. For example, when we read scripture from the Judeo-Christian tradition that a prophet proclaims to the power people and power structures of our community that we as a community are to care for the widow, the orphan, the homeless and the immigrant we often hear such an admonishment conclude with "...thus says the Lord". When we interpret such an archaic concluding phrase with more contemporary understandings about God we could rightly replace "thus says the Lord" with "so it is with the unfolding of life, love, and history! Be on the right side of history!" When we order our lives contrary to the unfolding of life and history then we maximize the potentiality for death.

In other words, the authority of the prophetic source is life itself. The powerful crazy message of the Cross is that a group of people so affected by the reckless love of Jesus took a tool of death and turned it into a symbol of life and said even if it kills us we believe that the way Jesus lived is the way to live. When we order our lives in agreement with the ground of being then we maximize the potential for life and love for all of creation. So, I invite you this morning to think of the Cross as a symbol of prophetic source. I also think the topsy-turvy value message of the Cross is also central to the use of the manger, the animal feeding trough, which holds the baby Jesus in the Christmas story. Symbols of death and poverty are used to tell stories of life and abundance.

In general, life and death are the prophetic outcomes and the wedgeblade is a symbol of prophetic outcomes. Let me read from our website about the wedgeblade.

"To the right of the symbol is unexplored territory with its concepts,

experiences, and values. God's movement is always towards the future. Shadow Rock reminds its members and friends that by planting one foot on the point and one foot in the future, the leaders of society, those who can affect positive change, will be shaping the future of our earth and its inhabitants. The Church itself struggles to live in this most risky and tenuous of places, on the 'cutting edge'."

We are Advent people because we stand one foot in what is and one foot in what is to be.

Life in its fullest expression honors freedom, justice, peace, love, and hope. Death is often experienced as the tragic and painful loss of the people and things we love. The more death in our lives the more grief we have. My friend, John Schwamberger from Millbury, Ohio, would read the paper every morning and almost every morning he would read of the death of another friend, acquaintance, or retired co-worker. He would laugh and at the same time big tears would well up in his eyes as he told me about another death. John taught me that the older a person got the more grief became a constant companion. But death as a prophetic outcome is not about loss and grief. Death as a prophetic outcome is about rebirth. The death of injustice makes room for the emerging of a new justice. The death of an institution makes room for the birth of a new movement of the Spirit of Life and Love.

And so, we have the prophetic sources of tradition and life itself, and we have the prophetic outcomes of justice and peace. The prophetic source and outcome must go hand in hand. The prophetic sources and the prophetic outcomes are two halves of a whole. One without the other weakens the prophetic calling of the people of God and this brings me to my own prophetic word for us as a congregation.

My observation of us here at Shadow Rock UCC is that some of us accept the prophetic source but reject the prophetic outcomes, and some of us reject the prophetic source but accept the prophetic outcomes. Put another way; some accept the Cross but reject the Wedgeblade and some reject the Cross but accept the Wedgeblade. To be more specific, I observe that those of us who have a more conservative ideological orientation lean toward supporting the authority of religious and prophetic sources and the preservation of "law and order" even to the extent of

asking oppressed people to wait until unjust laws can be changed. On the other side of the prophetic coin, those of us who have a more liberal ideological foundation lean toward the rejection of religious authority and prophetic sources but demand positive social change now. Each person has their reasons and their history that helps shape who they are. Different people are at different places on their journey. This is when the strength of our fellowship and the strength of this hard core value are being tested. When we say, "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here" we are stretching ourselves beyond our personal comfort zones. My point is that the acceptance of one half of the prophetic pie, whichever half it is, makes for an imbalance in word and deed; an imbalance in study and proclamation. This imbalance affects our ability to dialogue with each other about the most important issues facing our congregation and challenging our society. As a congregation we must have the Cross and the Wedgeblade. We must find a way to stand in this Advent tension and dialogue so as to avoid alienating the people we love.

To be true to our definition of a true prophet let me offer a word of hope. We are not like the people who dominate the discussion on our televisions, radios, and newspapers. While we may agree with some of the views and comments of Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and Keith Obermann we do not have to relate to each other the way they do. Our ideas are not in competition with each other. I believe in the spirituality math of 1 plus 1 equals 3; one idea plus another idea can equal a third idea. We do not dialogue as other people dialogue who have no hope or respect for each other. We share a mission and vision and we have a Spirit of Life and Love that is larger than any one person's or group's agenda. We have our individual stories that help shape who we are but we have a larger story that makes it larger claim on us as well. It is the story of life and love that begins at Christmas and where the story ends is up to us.