

First UU Church of Berks
Unitarian Universalist Source 2: Words and Deeds of Prophets
Rev. Sandra Fees
February 24, 2008



Last Sunday, I began a series of sermons on the six Unitarian Universalist sources. The sources help to answer the question: “Where can we turn to find inspiration and meaning in our lives?”

We talked about our first source: “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.” This source points to the longing we humans have for direct, personal experience. We want to have our own experience of God, the cosmos, beauty.

This morning we reflect on the second source: “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” This source speaks to what it means to keep alive the dream of a better world transformed by justice and compassion. Teachers and prophets help make that possible.

Our attitudes toward these teachers and prophets seem to resemble our attitudes toward fortune cookie wisdom. Let me explain. This past week there was an interview with Jennifer Lee on NPR’s All Things Considered about fortune cookies. Lee grew up as an American-born Chinese and is the author of the book, The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food.

I learned from Lee that while fortune cookies are thought of as Chinese, they are an American phenomenon. When attempts were made to take the fortune cookie back to China and Japan, it didn’t work very well.

The fortunes were crafted to meet American expectations. These expectations are that the fortunes will be positive. No one wants to get a fortune that portends bad things. When they do, the restaurants and manufacturers receive complaints.

In China and Japan, the expectations are different. When they get a fortune, it is fairly negative, and they prefer it that way. They want something that encourages them to take an action or engage in self-improvement. (“All Things Considered,” Feb. 20, 2008)

That’s what the prophets throughout the ages have offered. The prophets do not always tell us what we want to hear. They tell us what they believe has been revealed as a sacred truth. They point out things that require attention and improvement, and that can be uncomfortable. Americans on the whole seem to prefer optimism. Who can blame us?

The words and deeds of prophets challenge us by pointing out what we might otherwise choose to overlook. We might say the prophets are in the business of “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” ([Finley Peter Dunne](#))

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They are not about the business of affirming us with optimistic rhetoric that makes us feel good. They have their eye on a higher goal of altering unjust and evil structures and thereby transforming the world with love and justice.

As a result, they can often speak hard truths boldly, urging us to confront harsh realities and engage in courageous acts of justice.

Abraham J. Heschel, the great Hasidic scholar and philosopher, teaches that being a prophet means getting down to basics. He describes it this way, “Instead of showing us through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums.” The prophets speak of corruption, poverty, and homelessness, for example. (“What Manner of Man is the Prophet?” Parabola Magazine, Spring 1996)

The prophets do this because they feel these injustices “fiercely.” (Heschel) Fiercely. In a world where many ethical considerations and nuances are trivialized and ignored, where cheating in business and exploiting the poor are everyday occurrences rather than devastating miseries, those who feel such injustices fiercely are likely to stand out in the crowd.

They might even make us squirm in our seats or dislike them. They might talk about radical ideas like living together peaceably and expect us to actually strive to make that a reality.

Consider Mahatma Gandhi. He believed in changing unjust structures through education – not only by education of the mind but also of character. He taught the art of living peacefully with a spirit of solidarity.

As Gandhi said, “What is the use of [people] knowing many things if they do not know how to co-exist peacefully with their neighbors.”

In the ashram, Gandhi urged Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs to live together in harmony. He challenged people to come together despite their differences. In the words of Gandhi:

Every human being constitutes a partial revelation of the Truth. If we see everybody on a plane of equality we will not hesitate to introduce each acceptable aspect of other religions in our faiths. If I am a Hindu I should behave like a brother with the Muslims and other believers. I should not differentiate between people with distinct beliefs. (“Partial Revelation of the Truth,” Parabola Magazine, Walter Gardini, Spring 1996)

Everyone and every tradition has some piece of the truth. Prophetic words and deeds do not belong to one exemplar alone – not Jesus, Buddha, or Mohammed. Each religion and each culture has its own heroes and prophets. And we can learn from them all. We can discover some piece of truth from each of them.

James Luther Adams expressed a similar concept. Adams was a professor of religious social ethics at Meadville-Lombard, one of our two Unitarian Universalist seminaries, an ordained UU minister, and one of our most influential UU theologian of the 20th century.

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The term he used was the “prophethood of all believers.” It extended the concept of the “priesthood of all believers,” which was advanced by Martin Luther during the Reformation. The priesthood of all believers means that people can have direct access to God without an intermediary or priest.

The prophethood of all believers places us each in a position of responsibility for human behavior. Each person has some responsibility to be prophetic, to provide some piece of the truth, some part of the solution to our common problems.

In the liberal church in our tradition, this responsibility is shared among the members. Adams said,

A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times is not a prophetic church. ... The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior ... with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the [prophethood] of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways. (“The Prophethood of all Believers,” Essential JLA)

Our religion has a history of being prophetic. During the Time for All Ages, you heard some examples of UU men and women who have had a tremendous impact on society. Among my favorites are Olympia Brown, a Universalist, and the first woman ordained by a denomination who fought for a woman’s right to vote. There is also Joseph Priestley, who in addition to being a scientist, helped establish the first Unitarian congregations in this country. Our UU district is named for him.

Julia Ward Howe was prophetic in her work to make Mother’s Day a day of peace. And Emerson, who I spoke of last week, breathed new life into our faith with his emphasis on direct personal experience.

Our church here has had periods of strong prophetic witness in its own history and is today seeking to once again find its prophetic voice on gay rights, mental health issues, anti-racism, and poverty, among others. Being a prophetic church means engaging in human service work, moral reflection and social education, or collective social action.

As your minister, I have been called on to speak at vigils and community events. I find these to be extraordinary opportunities. They have pushed me to be a prophetic witness on contemporary moral and ethical issues that affect our society.

Sometimes these contributions of mine seem very small, nearly a whisper. I sometimes feel this way when I offer a prayer at a city council meeting or at another gathering. Yet later I learn that someone there was touched in some important way.

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Sometimes people find our healing faith as a result. The thing is, our liberal religion is unique in the community and its prophetic voice is much needed. There is a yearning for a liberal religious voice in the public square.

When we talked about the first source, I challenged each of you to reflect on and share your own religious experiences. When it comes to the second source, I encourage you to reflect on those individuals who have been teachers and prophets in your own life.

Think not simply of those who have affirmed you and made you feel good. Consider those who have pushed you to be more than you might have thought possible and who have made the world a better place.

These figures often emerge as bigger than life. We can be proud of and inspired by these people who are prophetic, who dazzle us with their own calling and accomplishment. But their example calls on us not merely to sit back in admiration. Their example calls on us – challenges us – to live our lives in ever more big-hearted and big-spirited ways. How have you done that in your own life? When have you acted your conscience and been a prophetic witness? What is the example you set for your children and grandchildren?

We don't need to try to be Jesus or Buddha. There are examples of everyday heroism and prophetic witness all around us and in our own words and deeds. We can stand in the presence of God and be struck by our own call to action.

We can hear the voice of conscience and act with courage. Each of us can be prophetic in some small way. We can learn to have our own vision and be part of the "prophethood of all believers." We can transform the world with our care.

Amen.