

## Pastor's Corner – Prairie Messenger Article – January 29, 2012

### “Prophets manifest in unlikely places, and challenge us”

*From Jan. 18 Prairie Messenger - “Liturgy and Life” by Anne Strachan*

*“My cousin James and I encounter the kid wearing the black hooded sweatshirt when he taps on the car window, as we’re about to pull away from our parking spot close to the hostel. He wants a ride to Safeway, a distance of a number of blocks. My first reaction is to mumble to James, ‘I don’t really want him in the back seat of my car.’ James responds, ‘Oh, you don’t?’ Suddenly I feel ungenerous in my fear of this stranger. And grudgingly I allow the teenaged kid to enter the enclave of the warm car.”*

*“His face appears angular and pale to my sideways vision, and there is a scar or birthmark. Afterward, I remember his thin sweatshirt, suitable for a much warmer day. I realize how cold I am in spite of my wool scarf thick coat and heavy hood. In contrast, he is ill equipped to ward off the wind sweeping in from the icy lake.*

*“In the car headed to Safeway, I say, ‘It’s cold.’ The kid says, ‘Yeah, I wouldn’t want to sleep outside,’ as though he often bunkers down in the street. His expression is inscrutable. For all I know, he bummed this ride to meet with his drug dealer. Or perhaps he’s a drug dealer. I give my head a shake to dispel that scary thought.*

*“We pull up to the intersection beside Safeway, and he says, ‘It’s another couple of blocks.’ I decide he’s lucky I allowed him in the car at all. I feel pushed to the edge of my comfort level and I will not go further. Employing my best mother-of-teenager’s voice, I firmly suggest he hop out, now.*

*“As the young stranger opens the car door and gets one leg out, I blurt, ‘I’m sorry if I seem suspicious. I don’t know you at all . . .’ The excuse peters out and sounds feeble to my ears. I feel frustrated and embarrassed, at an impossible distance from this nameless, unknown person. I feel helpless, and about as Christian as the imagined drug dealer.’*

*“Suddenly, the kid turns back. He swiftly leans in. He grips my shoulder for one intense moment. Then he’s gone.”*

Prophets manifest in unlikely places. Messengers from God - rich, poor, marginal or mainstream - challenge us and, when we are receptive, expand our comfort zones.

“O that today you would listen to his voice! Do not harden your hearts . . .” But it isn’t always easy to discern God’s voice in our own hearts, let alone to appreciate holiness in the heart of a questionable stranger who emerges from a harsh and hostile world.

St. Mark writes: “They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority . . .” Jesus then expands this authority to heal a man convulsed by an “unclean spirit.” Often, we label and marginalize certain people as “unclean.” But all of us - married, single, secure or living a questionable life on the street - are a mixture of dark and light, turmoil and peace. Can we push through our fear to listen to God’s voice? Will we then respond - with love and trust - to God’s healing touch?

Paul’s message can sometimes seem judgmental, contradicting ideas of an inclusive, open - hearted God: “The unmarried woman and the virgin are concerned about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit; but the married woman is concerned about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.” He says the same about men; according to Paul, married folk inevitably succumb to “divided interests.”

Worldly concerns, holiness and scandal coexist in all walks of life. Does Paul suggest that in order to be close to God, we must consecrate ourselves to a life of virginity and contemplation in a controlled “safe” environment? Even in contemplative life, “unhindered devotion” to the Lord - developing compassion for family, friends and strangers - is daunting. Perhaps, like all of us, Paul struggles in his journey to understand the myriad questions and concerns of his time and place.

Thomas Merton says: “Clean, unselfish love does not live on what it gets but on what it gives. It increases by pouring itself out for others . . .” Can we pour ourselves out with unselfish love for those unexpected and sometimes frightening prophets and messengers - married, single, gay, straight, virginal or otherwise - in our midst? To begin, we might put aside our fear; we might even invite them into the car as we travel through this challenging, complex world.

*“In the face of my reluctant, halfhearted, blundering Christianity, this stranger touched . . . no, gripped . . . my shoulder. In that deliberate gesture, he assured me that I’m not so bad. He understood my fear and forgave me for it. This marginal stranger forgives me. He blesses me” (Strachan, America Magazine, Sept. 22, 2008).*