

“Not On My Watch!”

For nearly a year, I have been greatly disturbed by the attack on the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright and Trinity United Church of Christ, which has culminated in recent weeks into a media feeding frenzy that has tarnished everyone in the process. For 36 years, this man of the Gospel and noted theologian has faithfully served his church, his community and his God, by helping those who could not help themselves and by lifting up those who have lost hope. Dr. Wright's ministry has been consistent and his commitment to the faith unmatched. While media critics, who have not spent a day in seminary, and have no idea how to exegete the Gospel, might find his sermons objectionable, Dr. Wright's theology and sermon delivery are deeply rooted in the faith and sacred traditions of Black Church.

For those who do not know Black Church or for those who simply have not taken time to do the research, here is a mini-history lesson. For the first 150 years of slavery, no organized religious bodies ever attempted to convert those who were enslaved. We established our own congregations and churches, based on our African-ancestored traditions mixed with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the process, we became committed to the idea of freedom. There were over 300 known slave rebellions in the United States, the vast majority of which were led by preachers of that day, like Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Because of that, two white men had to always be present at any slave-led church service. Even while enslaved we had preachers and pastors who spoke to the needs of our condition.

Now, there have always been accommodationist preachers, those who go along to get along. In biblical terms, they are false prophets. A prophet is simply one who speaks on behalf of God and God's people. A true prophet speaks truth to power and is not politically correct. The Old Testament prophets were not politically correct. The Apostle Paul was not politically correct. And Jesus, the son of God, was not politically correct. Jesus upset the status quo. He disrupted the comfortable. Remember, Jesus got angry and threw the money-changers out of the temple. Jesus raised some holy hell. So why can't Dr. Wright? You see, true prophets speak for God, use colorful language and occasionally use a non-traditional method to get their message across.

There is a strong, historical and contextual relationship between the slave-preacher and the social justice, activist preacher of today. And there is a place and role for God's angry prophets—think Amos, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah. They spoke on God's behalf to kings, to the poor and to the enemies of their nation. Then there are the 20th and 21st century prophets like Vernon Johns, Martin Luther King Jr., Samuel DeWitt Proctor *and* Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. The difference between false prophets and true prophets is the false prophet speaks to what the masses and those in power want to hear. The true prophet speaks truth no matter how painful. There is a price to be paid for being a prophet. And Dr. Wright is now paying that price both publicly and privately.

It was author Alex Haley who underscored the role and relationship of the Black pastor and their congregations. He said, African American pastors are akin to the African griot, a leader, shepherd, father and the one in whom the story of one's people has been embodied. For Trinity United Church of Christ and the greater African American faith community, Dr. Wright has been and is a formidable griot. At 81, I am an elder in this tribe of social justice preachers, but I, too, can say the legacy and reach of Dr. Wright's ministry has influenced my faith.

So what has been lost in inflammatory rhetoric and the talking heads of the day is that Dr. Wright, a theological scholar who speaks five languages fluently, has inspired a church to create over 100 fully-functioning ministries, created seven separate corporations, led thousands to Christ, speaks Sunday after Sunday out of a long and storied, proud and prophetic tradition of our faith. And he speaks in the tradition of the slave-preacher and social justice proclaimer who believed in setting the captives free.

Dr. Wright represents the best among us, one of the best in this tribe of prophetic preachers. He has made his church a place where one could express the centuries-old pain of being Black in America, while finding strength for a brighter day. An attack on this man of the God is an attack on all those of the cloth who believe in the social Gospel of liberation. And I will not stand for it. Not on my watch. Not today.



*Rev. Dr. Samuel B. McKinney and
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
(1961)*

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