

What Kind of Prophet?

Reflections on the Rhetoric of Preaching
in Light of Recent News Coverage of Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.
and Trinity United Church of Christ

John H. Thomas
General Minister and President
United Church of Christ

Over the weekend members of our church and others have been subjected to the relentless airing of two or three brief video clips of sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ for thirty-six years and, for over half of those years, pastor of Senator Barack Obama and his family. These video clips, and news stories about them, have been served up with frenzied and heated commentary by media personalities expressing shock that such language and sentiments could be uttered from the pulpit.

One is tempted to ask whether these commentators ever listen to the overcharged rhetoric of their own opinion shows. Even more to the point is to wonder whether they have a working knowledge of the history of preaching in the United States from the unrelentingly grim language of New England election-day sermons to the fiery rhetoric of the Black church prophetic tradition. Maybe they prefer the false prophets with their happy homilies in Jeremiah who say to the people: “You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place.” To which God responds, “The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds. . . . By sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed,” (Jeremiah 14.14-15). The Biblical Jeremiah was coarse and provocative. Faithfulness, not respectability was the order of the day then. And now?

What’s really going on here? First, it may state the obvious to point out that these television and radio shows have very little interest in Trinity Church or Jeremiah Wright. Those who sifted through hours of sermons searching for a few lurid phrases and those who have aired them repeatedly have only one intention. It is to wound a presidential candidate. In the process a congregation that does exceptional ministry and a pastor who has given his life to shape those ministries is caricatured and demonized. You don’t have to be an Obama supporter to be alarmed at this. Will Clinton’s United Methodist Church be next? Or McCain’s Episcopal Church? Wouldn’t we have been just as alarmed had it been Huckabee’s Southern Baptist Church, or Romney’s Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints?

Many of us would prefer to avoid the stark and startling language Pastor Wright used in these clips. But what was his real crime? He is condemned for using a mild “obscenity” in reference to the United States. This week we mark the fifth anniversary of the war in Iraq, a war conceived in deception and prosecuted in foolish arrogance. Nearly four thousand cherished Americans have been killed, countless more wounded, and tens

of thousands of Iraqis slaughtered. Where is the real obscenity here? True patriotism requires a degree of self-criticism, even self-judgment that may not always be easy or genteel. Pastor Wright's judgment may be starker and more sweeping than many of us are prepared to accept. But is the soul of our nation served any better by the polite prayers and gentle admonitions that have gone without a real hearing for these five years while the dying and destruction continues?

We might like to think that racism is a thing of the past, that Martin Luther King's harmonious multi-racial vision, articulated in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 and then struck down by an assassin's bullet in Memphis in 1968, has somehow been resurrected and now reigns throughout the land. Significant progress has been made. A black man is a legitimate candidate for President of the United States. A black woman serves as Secretary of State. The accomplishments are profound. But on the gritty streets of Chicago's south side where Trinity has planted itself, race continues to play favorites in failing urban school systems, unresponsive health care systems, crumbling infrastructure, and meager economic development. Are we to pretend all is well because much is, in fact, better than it used to be? Is it racist to name the racial divides that continue to afflict our nation, and to do so loudly? How ironic that a pastor and congregation which, for forty-five years, has cast its lot with a predominantly white denomination, participating fully in its wider church life and contributing generously to it, would be accused of racial exclusion and a failure to reach for racial reconciliation.

The gospel narrative of Palm Sunday's entrance into Jerusalem concludes with the overturning of the money changers' tables in the Temple courtyard. Here wealth and power and greed were challenged for the way the poor were oppressed to the point of exclusion from a share in the religious practices of the Temple. Today we watch as the gap between the obscenely wealthy and the obscenely poor widens. More and more of our neighbors are relegated to minimal health care or to no health care at all. Foreclosures destroy families while unscrupulous lenders seek bailouts from regulators who turned a blind eye to the impending crisis. Should the preacher today respond to this with only a whisper and a sigh?

Is Pastor Wright to be ridiculed and condemned for refusing to play the court prophet, blessing land and sovereign while pledging allegiance to our preoccupation with wealth and our fascination with weapons? In the United Church of Christ we honor diversity. For nearly four centuries we have respected dissent and have struggled to maintain the freedom of the pulpit. Not every pastor in the United Church of Christ will want to share Pastor Wright's rhetoric or his politics. Not every member will rise to shout "Amen!" But I trust we will all struggle in our own way to resist the lure of respectable religion that seeks to displace evangelical faith. For what this nation needs is not so much polite piety as the rough and radical word of the prophet calling us to repentance. And, as we struggle with that ancient calling, I pray we will be shrewd enough to name the hypocrisy of those who decry the mixing of religion and politics in order to serve their own political ends.

March 17, 2008