

Mary E. Hunt: It Takes So Little To Be Prophetic

Mary E. Hunt mary.hunt@his.com

WATER

8035 13th Street

Silver Spring, MD 20910-4803 USA

301 589-2509 fax 301 589-3150

It Takes So Little To Be Prophetic

Seekers Community

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Good morning.

What a pleasure to be with you for worship and to share some reflections with you during this odd, some say rather ordinary, Epiphany time between Christmas and Lent. It has been a long winter, so how lovely this warmish weekend is as a harbinger of things to come. Valentine's Day arrives this year just in the nick of time as the respite we all need, that break in routine. It is a chance to do something special for ourselves and for those we love. Let me extend to you an early Valentine's wish for abundant love, and encourage you to take the opportunity to exit from the ordinary a little this week and do something fun.

I am grateful to Kate Cudlipp for inviting me to join you for worship this morning. Kate is always a welcome person at WATER events since she brings with her the life of this community. Of course Sonya Dyer and Jackie McMakin have been part of our extended alliance from the beginning over the now more than a dozen years that WATER has been in existence. Emily Gilbert was also an early WATER person; she recently connected with

women in Iceland via one of WATER's Visiting Scholars, the first Icelandic woman to earn a doctorate in theology who is writing her dissertation with us this year. All of these people, as well as your generous support for our work over the years, make me feel right at home this morning with this group of Seekers whom I understand to be connected in spirit with millions of seekers the world over.

I assume you have asked yourselves many times what it is that you seek. Far be it from me to suggest what it might be, though it looks like justice from my perspective. Let me share my reflections on your seasonal theme of prophecy under the rubric "It Takes So Little to be Prophetic" as a way to join you in the seeking. Before I continue, I want to assure all of you that I wrote this myself, Anonymous being too busy evading the press to help me out. I also want to assure you that Hillary Rodham Clinton suggested a title, *It Takes a Little Village to be Prophetic* but I stood fast with my own words, *It Takes So Little to be Prophetic*.

You might think that mine is a cynical, inside-the-Beltway approach if ever you've heard one. But I want to take very seriously your ongoing exploration of prophecy by suggesting that unfortunately it is not all that difficult to be prophetic these days. More's the pity. We need prophetic input to jar us from the everyday when the stock market is at unprecedented highs and the access to services for people who are poor at unprecedented lows; when the Republican primary campaign in Iowa this weekend features mean-spirited charges and counter-charges, with the election certain to include more of the same; when the middle class is eroding as quickly as the C&O canal during the floods, with no quick fix in sight; and when atrocities committed against children, especially by their parents, leave us breathless with horror. We need prophetic people to jump-start new conversations, prophetic people who point out news ways of doing things. They are in short supply, perhaps because the cost of prophecy can be so

dear. But I want to propose instead that it is a most ordinary dimension of Christian life.

It does not take much to buck the tide these days when there is seemingly little real opposition left, little difference between the two major political parties, no counterbalance to the U.S. as a superpower, a seemingly shrinking cadre of the "same old people" to take up the pressing issues, for instance, racism, poverty, AIDS and ecocide in our day.

Few of us like to raise hard questions about sacrosanct subjects that need to be thought about in new ways— like the notion that some people should be able to earn endless amounts of money while others have none; like the idea that health care is a privilege for those who have jobs or are married to people with jobs rather than a right for all of us because we have bodies; like the concept that part-time workers do not need or deserve benefits, that children need only a heterosexual nuclear family to raise them, or that today's immigrants don't deserve the same consideration that our great-grandparents received from this country generations ago. But we belong to communities like this one precisely because we want to explore such things and change them. That is what it means to be prophetic.

Such taboo topics beg our careful, prophetic attention; they fairly eject us from the insular cocoons some have spun to avoid hard questions of our day. It does not take much to be that kind of prophetic because the discussion, especially in Washington, tends to languish at a very pragmatic, horse-trading level. Few people venture another view altogether; even fewer argue that our faith compels us to move toward a horizon of equality and mutuality, not toward a zenith of money and power; and virtually no one is willing to suggest that we need something akin to a jubilee year on things like the external debt in order to create structures of equality throughout the world. Those who make such preposterous suggestions are written off here, but when I join colleagues

in Latin America, for example in Chile next month where WATER is trying to develop an exchange program for feminist theological students, it is the most normal conversation in the world: until the debt is abolished justice will be a dream delayed forever.

Yes, prophecy is in short supply in our circles. People who stray from the straight and narrow are few and far between. They almost never make it onto the Sunday morning talk shows where scintillas of difference are magnified as a way to avoid rerouting unproductive conversations to fundamental ones. Most of our prophets are written off as casualties of the de-institutionalization policies, certainly not lauded for their keen judgment and taken seriously in the decision-making processes of our communities. No, prophetic activity is out of vogue, as stale as last week's newspaper. My goal is to bring it back with more energy and flair than ever, to introduce the idea of the "prophetic call of all believers" like the much touted "priesthood of all believers."

Our present situation is odd and lamentable since prophetic activity has been prized among Christians throughout history. At the risk of romanticizing, I admit that most prophets have made us angry even though in retrospect we canonize them. I think in my own tradition of Dorothy Day, co-founder with Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker Movement which inspired so much of the progressive Catholic sector. Their soup kitchens and houses of hospitality predated the food programs and shelters we now need in virtually every city and many towns. Their practice of keeping a Christ room in every house for people who need a place to stay, and their attitude that every person they serve is a guest, not a client or a case, but a guest as Jesus would, be is still prophetic in our time.

Dorothy Day was persona non grata in my good Catholic high school in the late 1960's, obviously too hot to handle in her suspected "red" leanings and her rejection of war taxes. I sensed then that she was prophetic and that she was someone to

model myself after, however limited the imitation might be. Today, decades later, she is revered, nearly beatified, by the same people who have only lately come to realize that her reading of the Bible and what it teaches we must do for those in need was prophetic in the most ordinary sense of the word: "she insisted on things that others could postpone insisting upon," as I once heard it described by the son of Anne McGrew Bennett, another prophetic woman.

Anne McGrew Bennett was a pioneer in feminist theology, a Protestant laywoman who, in the 1960's and 1970's, applied her learnings from civil rights and anti-war struggles to women's issues in church and society. She lectured and wrote extensively, always disarming her audiences who expected, perhaps because she had such a grandmotherly look, a pious bible study and received instead a bold call to conscience.

Dorothy Day made people uncomfortable with her piercing questions, her relentless organizing, her consistent writing. The older Dorothy Day got, the more she blew their stereotypes of a service-oriented, religious woman by demanding justice for poor people, opposing vehemently the Vietnam War, championing Cesar Chavez and the Farmworkers before other people knew who they were. All the time she lived simply, riding Greyhound buses to speaking engagements (and sometimes to jail) with just her oversized purse in which she always kept a Bible and a jar of instant coffee.

She did not think of herself as a feminist. Despite an early abortion before her conversion to Catholicism, she confounded those who might pigeonhole her by her insistence on adhering to church policy even ahead of her own conscience. Prophets are like that, never pleasing anyone most of the time, but maintaining their clear-eyed approach despite it all.

Anne Bennett was a great deal like Dorothy Day though she lived in the relative luxury of Union Theological Seminary, where her husband John was a distinguished professor of ethics

and later president. She, too, made people very uncomfortable by her unwavering approach to justice, including her arrest at a New York City draft board, and her insistence that Christian imagery and symbolism were intimately related to social structures, that a God who was Father, Lord, Ruler, King was no accident in a bellicose society. With Anne, too, I knew there was something special, something to seek to emulate. Now I know it was her prophetic calling that I admired, that I seek to replicate however dimly. I can only imagine how hard it must have been to be each of these women, but it is, I think, easier for us to be prophetic because they have shown something of the way.

I do not mean to trivialize the prophetic. To the contrary, I am so persuaded of the value of prophesy that I want to offer some reinforcement as you break new ground as a community, and encourage you to persevere in your prophetic activity, individually and together, both because it is so necessary and because it is relatively easy in the absence of much competition in our day. A little history will help.

Prophecy in Hebrew and Christian scriptures can seem a rather traditional enterprise – Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah, for example, are rather well known fare. But when we think, too, of the women prophets, whose work was not so much the written word as the lived word, a fuller picture of prophecy comes into focus from which I think we can draw some insights on just how little it really takes to be prophetic, yet just how important it is that communities nurture such people.

Biblical scholar Antoinette Clark Wire, in her carefully crafted book *THE CORINTHIAN WOMEN PROPHETS: A RECONSTRUCTION THROUGH PAUL'S RHETORIC*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), explains how the women prophets in Paul's time were received. They began as rather lowly members of their communities, but eventually as they showed their abilities they were granted much more status, taken more seriously. Gradually they felt themselves to be an important part of the divine plan so their

self-confidence soared, and with it their words and their works.

By the second century the role of women prophets was institutionalized as one of many church offices that each community would recognize. This cues us to the fact that we need such people in our midst even when we find their messages difficult, which we do more often than not. It also explains why prophets need communities, since their ideas and their voices are useless without audience and echo. Further, it enjoins us to BE those people.

The extra-canonical document entitled the *STATUTES OF THE APOSTLES* contained the instruction to ordain women for the job of prophet: "Let them ordain three Widows, two to continue together in prayer for all who are in trials, and to ask for revelations concerning that which they require." (Karen Jo Torjesen, "Reconstruction of Women's Early Christian History" in *SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES*, NY: Crossroad, 1993, Vol. 1, p. 298). Such prophets gave what we might think of as individual and communal readings; they were consulted for big decisions and trusted when they spoke.

Church history buffs will recall an important group of such women in the second century. Notable among them were Maximilla and Priscilla who were called the New Prophecy by those who liked them, and referred to as the Montanists by those who did not. Recall that the Montanists were considered heretical because, according to their detractors, their prophetic teachings by-passed Jesus and the Christian scriptures in favor of ideas of their own. Typical prophets—conscious, creative, committed and contrary.

These Montanist women, like Dorothy Day and Anne McGrew Bennett of my lifetime, have given me a very useful way to think about prophecy. I have come to understand it not as the opposite of priesthood, as it is often juxtaposed, but rather like priesthood in that it belongs to everyone.

We speak so often in these circles about the priesthood of all believers. But I would like to offer another metaphor, namely, the "prophetic call of all believers" after the fashion of I Corinthians 14: 31-33, "For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and be encouraged; and the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets. For God is not a God of confusion but of peace." This call to share or socialize prophecy, if you will, is at the heart of the Christian vocation as we turn the century. While it may not be as easy as I have suggested, it is at least as important. Let us look toward Lent cultivating the prophetic in each one of us, sparking the prophetic that we are together.

Amen. Blessed be. Let us make it so.