

Do We Really Want to Listen to the Prophets?

Reflections on Hosea 2

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I get this from *Publishers Weekly*. One of the well-traveled aphorisms of Yogi Berra was, “If you don’t attend the funeral of others they will not attend yours.” Whatever you make of that comment, lurking behind it is an interesting conviction. Central to a well-lived life is the importance of social networks for shaping community.

This brings to mind the work of the Harvard sociologist, Robert D. Putnam. Putnam has used this principle in connection with his examination of religious communities. In a famous earlier work called “Bowling Alone,” he decried the disintegration of civic and religious networks in local communities. Instead of seeking out others to form a fraternal club, increasingly, many steer away from social networks. They prefer to bowl alone. Now, in a recent book he revisits the issue. In *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Putnam assesses American religious communities. Using criteria that is overwhelmingly behavioral, he and his colleagues seek to determine the value of religion for American society. His verdict: mostly good. As opposed to the general portrayal of church people in popular media as bigots, he thinks religion should be encouraged. Research shows that the best neighbors are religious people. They give more time and money to civic activities up and down the line. They have fewer problems with the law. And on behavioral terms, by any measure, they are happier than other groups or individuals. The American Grace is that despite the diversity of religion in this country, paradoxically, it produces social cohesion. The need to coexist together promotes tolerance not conflict.

All of this leaves in its wake a particular understanding of religion that is widespread today. One reviewer of Putnam referred to it as “easygoing...non-threatening, non-boat-rocking-religion.” There is no doubt, on pragmatic grounds such religion contributes to social cohesion in our increasingly pluralistic society. The elites welcome it. They like to think that religion only has value when it is useful to facilitate other goals and objectives. From a perspective of public policy, this kind of religion ought to be encouraged not discouraged. But is this congruent with biblical faith? It sounds more like what the prophets were speaking against than what they were calling for.

The Church Today

Let us bring this idea home to our school where, our mission involves training for leadership. Here I wish to draw attention to an oddity. In our chapel services last Fall we worked through chapter after chapter of the scorching assessments of Judah's faith given by Jeremiah. Similarly, we have done the same this Fall with Amos; and now we are working with Hosea. What strikes me as ironic is that, on the one hand, as students and faculty we swim in the water of a "non-boat-rocking" religious ethos; yet, at the same time, we appeal to the authority for what we do to our founders -- the prophets and Jesus -- who manifestly shook things up. To me this is a major disconnect. It ought to get our attention.

Years ago I was at an evening session listening to comments of the famous social activist (later preacher at Riverside Church in New York), William Sloane Coffin. He was addressing people involved in ministry. I especially remember him saying that if we ever would have encountered the prophets and Jesus we would probably be uncomfortable. These were not the folk we would invite over to a party with our best friends. True believers do not fit in today's "non-boat-rocking" easy believism version of Christianity. And yet, paradoxically, it is the word spoken by these people, the prophets, that we honor as the word of God. It is this word that functions as the basis for calling us together. Somehow or other, however, we still find it easy to dismiss what they say. Sometimes we even act as though the prophets are irrelevant. We prefer our comfortable social networks.

The Embarrassment of The Prophets

Nowhere is this so striking as the second chapter of Hosea. Things were not going well for the prophet. His wife had run off with other lovers. The whole chapter, of course, is a thinly veiled metaphor. What is ultimately being addressed is Israel's adulterous religious and political relationships. She has played the harlot. But still, Yahweh, the wounded lover, refuses divorce. Hosea/Yahweh pleads and seeks a restoration of relationships built on the covenantal obligations acknowledged in Judah.

The notes in my Bible refer to Hosea's preaching as "a gospel of redeeming love." Fair enough. But, I wonder if this really captures the entire story. In the whole book we never hear his wife's side of it. What really caused her to run away? What sort of a man would give those strange names to his children anyway? This man sounds really strange. I have a feeling that if we met Hosea we probably wouldn't care for him.

But, of course, that is not the point. We already knew that the prophets were odd people. What is critical is that these messengers of clay delivered a word from the Lord. Most of the time it was a kick in the pants. In this case it finally ends in a word of grace. Yahweh does not quit in his relationship with his people. As a wounded lover he will pursue us until covenant is renewed, righteousness is restored; and justice and steadfast love is spread abroad in the land. As well as judgment, he gives us a word of hope.

Hosea lived in a terrible time. Israel was fragmented and despondent. We too today serve in a context where there is deep pessimism about the future for the people of God in this land. In many churches the numbers are dropping and even the stalwarts in the church are demoralized by what they see taking place. Indeed, many in the church have lives that parallel the situation of the prophet. We often look the other way; but indeed most families in the church are not that far removed from Hosea's personal situation. Still, out of his mouth came words of hope and redemption. This reminds us that it can be out of flawed vessels like ourselves that God's word can be heard today. The answer to our predicament this morning is not a "non-boat-rocking" faith that allows us to remain in obscurity; but a renewed commitment to take seriously our covenantal relationships; a vital sense that despite the fact that we are rowing against the current, the steadfast love of the Lord never fails -- no matter where we find ourselves. Despite our weaknesses we can be the vessels that speak the word that needs to be heard in today's comfortable social networks. May God give us the courage to do so.

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