

Stanford Memorial Church
July 8, 2012

WELCOMING PROPHETS
C. George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.

Old Testament Lesson: 2 Samuel 5.1-5, 9-10

Gospel Lesson: Mark 6.1-13

There are profits and there are prophets, and though they sound somewhat the same, they are spelled quite differently; they usually function quite differently, and they generally inhabit very different worlds. When working together they can accomplish incredible things for the benefit society. But, unfortunately, they more frequently inclined to be in opposition to one another.

Walk into a room filled with Wall Street brokers and captains of industry and tell them they should welcome profits, you can rest assured that—either way or the other—they will respond, Amen and “Right on!” The goal or purpose of free market capitalism is, in a word, to make profit: P-R-O-F-I-T. The goal is often so compelling that the end justifies almost any means. Accordingly, this past week in the Wall Street Journal (the Bible for many profiteers), we read that a prominent pharmaceutical company had to pay a penalty of 3 billion dollars to the government for illegally marketing drugs and withholding safety data from regulators. Or we are informed that, Goldman Sachs, a venerable leader in the world of finance will be writing off a debt of 2 billion dollars due to unduly risky investing. That figure was later recalculated to 5 billion dollars. Now, as of last week, we are informed the actual loss may be closer to 9 billion dollars. In the eighth chapter of Mark, just a few verses beyond our Gospel lesson for today, we hear Jesus declaring—to those who were in effect the profiteers of their day—“what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life” (Mark 8.36).

Occasionally the world of profit is turned upside down—or, better yet, placed in proper perspective--by a prophet: P-R-O-P-H-E-T. As a case in point, think of Andrew Carnegie, readily recognized as one of the robber barons of the industrial revolution. Raised as a Scotch Presbyterian, he came to the United State to make his fortune—and succeeded beyond his dreams. While some of the means by which he accumulated his fortune have frequently been called into question, a good deal of evidence suggests that this disciple of profit was ultimately swayed by the prophetic words of Jesus, “What does it profit a man to gain the world and forfeit his life?” The return of Carnegie’s spirit to his biblical roots is evident by the thousands of community libraries that he funded across the country, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His pungent and oft quoted statement—“The man who dies rich dies disgraced”—must have undoubtedly caught the attention of his financial colleagues. In effect, Carnegie, the man devoted to profit, like Francis of Assisi centuries earlier, who set aside his wealthy family life style, heard and internalized the prophetic words, “What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

While we may, without much difficulty, know what profit is all about, the role and function of the prophets is not so clear and readily understood. For most of us, what it means to be a prophet is derived from the Old Testament, and, at times, some of them may strike us as a bit nutty--as when one covers himself with dirt, another wears rags, or others exclaim about all kinds of visions—such as wheels within wheels-- which may strike us a bit schizophrenic. This can lead to a good many misconceptions about the prophets. Some may strike us as almost boiling over with anger. When they appear to denounce angrily everyone in

sight, we may be tempted to write them off as misanthropists. Or they may sometimes be thought of as people who can predict the future, when they proclaim what is going to happen to a king of the nation as well as to the people of Israel as a whole. But these are all secondary characteristics. The classic prophetic utterance, which is the very core of what a prophet is all about, has been given to us by the prophet Micah when he declared, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6.8). This is an eloquent and timeless summary of the prophetic message: devotion to God and the extension of justice and loving kindness to all members of the community—especially those overwhelmed by life, such as widows, orphans, those living on the streets.

This is the background of our gospel lesson for today. Jesus (along with John the Baptist) regularly identified himself with the prophets who preceded him, constantly extending care and healing to those about him. In one instance just prior to our gospel lesson, one of the leaders of the synagogue runs and falls at the feet of Jesus, exclaiming that his daughter is at the point of death--and begs him to come. Jesus responds that he will. When Jesus and a crowd following him reached the leader’s house, several people came out, shaking their heads sadly, and saying, “The girl is dead. It’s too late to do anything.” Jesus responded to the leader of the synagogue, “Do not fear, only believe” (Mark 6.36). Jesus entered the house, took the twelve-year old girl by the hand saying, “Little girl, get up.” She responded by getting up and walking about. Of course everyone was astonished and overcome with amazement. At this point, Jesus makes what appears to be a strange request: he orders them to tell no one, and then tells them to give the girl something to eat. The fact that Jesus ordered them to tell no

one, may strike us as a bit strange. In the gospel lesson just read for today, however, we get something of a revealing answer.

Immediately after this incredible healing, Jesus visits his home town of Nazareth and, on the sabbath, he proceeds to preach in the synagogue. The people are astonished and mystified. They inquire of one another, "What's going on here? Where did he obtain this knowledge." Then other stories begin to circulate, such as the one about restoring to life a twelve-year old girl who appeared to be dead, the daughter of a leader of the synagogue in a neighboring village. This leads to more consternation, confusion and criticism. "How can this be? This does not make any sense! We all know his dad, Joseph the carpenter and his mother, Mary. He and his sisters and brothers all received the same education as the other kids in Nazareth. They all played hide-and-go-seek together. What in the world is going on and who does he think he is?" As the condemnation escalates, Jesus makes one of his most memorable statements . . . which has been cited repeatedly through the centuries . . . one which each one of us has quite probably used on numerous occasions. "Jesus said to them, 'Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house' (Mark 4.) Most of us tend to use a shortened version which goes, "A prophet is without honor in his own country."

This appears to be such a universal expression that we need to take a moment to stop and ask ourselves, "Why is a prophet without honor in his, or her, own country." We may find one illuminating answer in Edward Wilson's recent book, *The Social Conquest of the Earth*. This Harvard professor, known as the father of the field of sociobiology and the world's leading authority on the study of ant, calls our attention to the fact that around 60,000 years ago the

homo sapiens, in other words our ancestors, began to surge towards the head of the evolutionary line. And the key to their success was the development of more complex and integrated social networks. Language developed beyond positive and negative grunts to warning of a possible danger from another group, to where to find water, to pointing out a safe place if an attack seemed imminent. (possible Wilson Quote).

But social groups, like individuals, are something of a two-edged sword: assets often have the potential of becoming liabilities. On a very basic level some sort of social network is essential, from our birth on, for our survival. As Gabriel Marcel, the existentialist writer so succinctly put it, "To be is to be with." Even today study after study confirms that one of the leading factors in having a healthy and happy life is to have a strong social network of friends and family. Statistically, people with such a network live longer, tend to be more optimistic, are less likely to be depressed, and have a lower rate of such things as suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse.

But the strengths of the social network can also become the source of problems and liabilities. A social group has to have a leader and, as it gets larger, a group of leaders. So how are they to be identified or selected? At this point, competition enters the picture. Families struggle to ensure one of their members becomes a leader. All social groups seem to have an unwritten rule about not allowing one member to get too far ahead of the others. And any kind of change is commonly resisted. This is precisely what Jesus confronted when his former neighbors said to one another: "how can this young man dare to teach us, as if he possesses more wisdom than we?" No wonder the gospel lesson goes on to inform us that "(Jesus) could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them"

(Mark 6.5). No matter what he said and did, they were adamantly opposed to allowing him to somehow be elevated above themselves. They refused to believe what their eyes could not deny.

The ambiguous nature of our social systems is reflected in countless familiar aphorisms. We are all familiar with the expression, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." But what about the equally popular and antithetical saying, "Familiarity breeds contempt?" Historically, prophets have repeatedly risked censure and rejection by stepping into this social ambiguity in one of two ways. The first group is the visionary prophets who envision and advocate for the dream of a better society in which all the members benefit. What better example of this than the story of our independence as a nation and the incredible prophetic figures who made it happen: George Washington who declines the opportunity to become a king; Benjamin Franklin, who probably contributed more than anyone to the adoption of the constitution by his ability to mediate between fiercely opposing parties; or Alexander Hamilton's vision of a federal form of government that would transform a few independent colonies into one great nation for the benefit of all. Or less than a hundred years later our nation would be blessed by the prophetic vision of Abraham Lincoln, along with Harriet Beecher Stowe, for a nation free of slavery. Or a half century later President Woodrow Wilson attempts to establish a League of Nations to pursue the dream of international peace. Though his dream was not adopted, it found expression a half a century later with the establishment of the United Nations. We are indebted to each of these prophetic figures, every one of whom experienced intense criticism and denunciation in their pursuit of a vision for a better country.

The second group of prophets, rather than envisioning a better, focus their attention to current wrongs in the society which need to be corrected. This often entails speaking out against vested interests whose practices undermine and threaten to seriously damage our society. One current example could well be those who call our attention to the fact that our middle class, which had much to do with making America great, is shrinking at an alarming rate--as the rich get richer and poor get poorer. They point to the economic reality that from 1979 to 2007 the wages for the top 1% of our wage earners grew 156%. Earners in the 90th to 95th percentiles had wage growth of 34%. While workers in the bottom 90 percent had the weakest wage growth, at 17% from 1979 to 2007.

These prophets, both the visionaries and those denouncing dehumanizing current practices—though they may make us uncomfortable—need to be welcomed, as they seek to make our society a better place as well as to correct abuses and indifference within our society that are leading us in the wrong direction.

And finally, along with these prophets without, we need to recognize and welcome the prophet within each one of us. Each us has at least a flicker of a vision of what might make our community a little better as well as rectifying those things that are causing us to get off track. It may not be easy to put into action, there may be resistance and criticism. But then, think how different it must have been for those few citizens of Nazareth who welcomed Jesus the prophet rather than going with the crowd who missed all the excitement because they listened to the old saw about a prophet being without honor in his or her own country. Amen