

# “An Unlikely Prophet

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Sunday, January 31, 2016  
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Readings from Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and Jeremiah 1:4-10

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

*1 Corinthians 13:1-13*

*Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”*

*Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,” says the Lord.*

*Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”*

*Jeremiah 1:4-10*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of you Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we carry within, the words that we’ve offered in song and in prayer, the words we have heard from scripture as well as the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ and let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ’s faithful name. Amen.

Today in the life of the church we get to celebrate the ordination and installation of new officers--deacons and elders. We as Presbyterians do so as an act of the congregation where we decide who it is that we will entrust for the years ahead to care for and to guide all of us as the body of Christ. One of the unique things about being Presbyterian is that we select those leaders, officers, and then we basically tell them to go and to discern the will of God and to figure out the answers to all the hard questions, and we will support them and encourage them and say "yes" to whatever it is that they discern. In a sense we hand over our vote or our discernment or our prayer to these chosen people and trust that they are listening to the voice of God to provide care and encouragement, to provide for our worship and education, our nurture and our support in the Christian life. And we do so today in the tension between two great texts of scripture: the call of the prophet Jeremiah, a young boy who hears God say to him *you, go* and Paul's exposition on love in 1 Corinthians, a passage that we hear most often read at weddings. God says to the prophet *go, speak, do not be afraid, pluck up, pull down, destroy and overthrow* before he says *build and plant* at the end. And Paul says that love is the most important thing for us to have. If we have the tongues of angels or if we have prophets or we have visions or we have great prayer or we have great ministry or mission, no matter what we have if we do not have love then we have nothing. Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious nor boastful nor rude. And so we find ourselves living in this tension. Speaking the truth of God to our enemies and our neighbors or living with faith, hope and love and having love be the greatest of these.

I don't know about you but when I think about the call of the prophet, I do not have any loving images that come to mind. When I think about the prophet, I think about someone who is set apart to go speak against the evils of idolatry or injustice, to overturn systems and structures and societies and to proclaim that God's wrath is coming upon you if you do not change the way you live. And then I think about Paul writing that love is patient and kind, it's not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. So which is it? Is it the voice of the prophet condemning or is it the voice of love? Or are we somewhere in between?

I think it was earlier this week I saw a few minutes of a news cast where there was a pastor with a big pulpit and a Bible on it and he was starting to gear up his congregation and you could tell that the rhythm of the sermon was starting to catch on and he was in full prophetic mode and he kept tellin' them that they need to stand up against evil, that the devil has unleashed the minions upon the earth to change us, to trap us, to trick us, to get us to believe to do things that are against the will of God and the devil's at work and we need to all stand up against all the angels of the devil. We need to stand up and rebuke the devil. We need to stand up and say "Oprah, enough!" And I sat there and I'm like "Did he just say, 'Oprah'?" Really? But man did he capture the essence of how prophets are caricatured in our culture today. To be a prophet means to get all riled up, to get your hair on fire, to start yellin' and screamin' and spittin' from the pulpit and then to denounce something like Oprah? You may not like Oprah, but think about all the good she's done for hundreds of thousands of women and people, empowering them to believe in what God has given them, encouraging them to make a better life for themselves, all the articles and books and..... really? Oprah? Hmmmm.

And I thought what a poor example of the prophet that we would set before our officers if we think that the prophets of God are only those who have their hair on fire and are denouncin' everything left and right. So I set about to try to find a different example of what a prophet might look like, and maybe someone who could take the prophetic power that comes to Jeremiah to go out, to tear down and to pull down and to destroy and to overthrow in order to plant and to build something that may be just as loving.

I found her, by the way. Her name is Eula Hall. She grew up in a holler near Greasy Creek, Kentucky. She graduated from the eighth grade. When she was 15 her parents sent her to a canning factory in Ontario, New York, in order to earn money. But the owners of the canning factory decided her employment wasn't a good idea because she started talking to all her co-workers about their despicable conditions and she was sent home for inciting a labor riot. So she came home, got married and had kids. In the early 1970s as she looked around her community she started to get disgusted. She realized that most of the people that she knew were either uninsured or underinsured and had no access to medical care. So she took it upon herself to do something about it. She raised \$1400 and went to the local hospital, Our Lady of the Way, in Martin, Kentucky, and begged two doctors to help her out. They decided that they could do that and so she got a trailer and soon people were coming for visits, but eventually the people that started to come were more than the trailer could hold, so she moved her family out of her house and turned her house into the new medical clinic. Again she just started seeing people over and over and over. Money came through fundraisers and grants and things expanded.

But in 1982, about ten years after she began, an arsonist destroyed the clinic one night. You think about all that you have poured into something like that. This woman had given her life, her money, her passion, her wisdom, her vision to create something good for the community and someone said, "No, not here" and burned it to the ground. As a true prophet of love, Eula Hall did not let this setback stop her. She did something that I find absolutely amazing. The next day she got a picnic table and pulled it under a willow tree near where the clinic had burned down and then she called the telephone company and said, "Hey, can you come install a telephone for me on a willow tree by a picnic table?" Can you see it now, the AT&T van with the cones around the picnic table? And the technician saying, "Ma'am, on this side of the tree or the other?" She wanted to have the same phone number. She sat there day and night answering the phone. The doctors came and at that picnic table they provided care. She hung on, it grew, more people gave money, it grew some more. Now there is a clinic with x-ray equipment, a pharmacy and a dental office next door. All because she had that prophetic passion to say, "You know what? This isn't right."

But when asked, "Why did you do this?" Her quote is just so beautiful. All she said was "This t'ain't right and I need to change it." She calls herself a hillbilly activist. But I wonder about all the people who line up to get medical care. I wonder about the mother who brings her sick child and is not sure what to do. I wonder what she thinks about this prophet who understands not just how to say no, but also understands the importance of saying "yes" in love. Eula Hall has been recognized by the President, by senators, by congressmen and women and countless universities. She received an honorary doctorate beside Desmond Tutu. But I happen to wonder if there isn't a special place in heaven for her. For someone who can hold the tension and let love win and then act. In the face of all the odds and the all the setbacks and all critiques and criticisms, she simply keeps on doing what God invites her to do.

My hope is that each of us can live in the tension between the prophetic and the loving and that we can listen deep, deep into the needs of those around us and that we can find the power to say "Yes" to their need, whatever it is, whatever it takes, whatever setbacks we encounter, my prayer is that we, too, can be faithful like Eula Hall. Amen.