

Prophets for Peace – Trinity Sunday

Based on David Mesenbring Jan.7/22 Christian Century

Numbers 11:24-30 by Patty Friesen June 4/23

Today the first Sunday after Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, we hear about the work of God, our Creator, Jesus our Redeemer and the Spirit filled prophets. Numbers 11 is a rich resource for theological reflection on the nature of community, the importance of prophetic leadership, and the uneasy relationship between tradition and social change. Joshua assumes a central role in the story of Eldad and Medad. Joshua is a charismatic leader with a special role *inside* the tent of meeting. He is concerned about the unpredictable presence of God's Spirit *outside* the tent of meeting in the camp. Wishing to control the spirit, he urges Moses to make Eldad and Medad stop prophesying. This demand evokes a response from Moses: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all God's people were prophets, and that God would put the Holy spirit on them!" Thus Moses rejects the desire of Joshua to control the transmission of his spirit to the seventy elders. Moses does not hoard his own charismatic power; indeed, he wishes that all the people were prophets.

Howard Thurman slide - I've preached about Howard Thurman before and I keep coming back to his 1949 Jesus and the Disinherited theological work as I try to continue to find my way in theological Christian non-violence in the midst of the Ukrainian war. Howard powerfully re-interpreted Jesus not only as a personal Saviour for black Americans but as a racially oppressed Jew in a segregated society in his time. Jesus intimately knew the suffering of African Americans in the US and gave them a model for dignity and non-violent resistance to segregation. Thurman presented blacks with 4 possible responses to their second class status as Jesus had 4

possible responses to his second class status as a Jew in the Roman empire. I'll make the translation for Mennonite history and the current situation in Ukraine as well.

Group of 4 dolls slide – As our Matrushkas will demonstrate for us this morning – one response to an oppressive situation is #1 - Assimilation - which means acquiescence and collaboration with the ruling power. As a Matrushka nesting doll, you work to fit in with all the other Russian and Ukrainian Matrushka nesting dolls and don't cause any waves. In Jesus' time this would be all the Jewish tax collectors like Zaccheus and King Herod who collaborated with Rome in order to stay alive and gain benefits. In Howard Thurman's time in the 1950s and 60s - these would be all the blacks who were given a seat in politics as long as they didn't rock the boat and didn't ask for anything more than they were given by the white system. In Ukraine, this would be all Ukrainians who work with and for the Russians as they take over cities. In Russia, this would be all citizens who keep their mouths shut about the war in order to keep their jobs and stay out of jail. Assimilation is a survival tactic and keeps one alive during oppression but becomes harder to justify later when the oppressive system collapses.

Doll in basket slide - # 2 - Isolation would be the opposite of assimilation. It is the enclosed retreat from all systems like this Matrushka doll living in her fenced in basket and not interacting or intermarrying with those outside the basket. In Jesus' time, these were the Essenes - a mystical religious group that lived in communes in the desert. John the Baptist was one of these. In early Christianity - these were the mystical Christians who also lived in the desert. In Anabaptist history - past and present - these are the Amish, Hutterites and Russian Mennonites who lived in colonies and didn't have political interaction. In Howard Thurman's time, these are religious blacks who go to church all the time and pray for heaven while working in the cotton fields. In Ukraine and Russia right now - this may also be the super religious - the Ukrainian and

Russian Orthodox, Jewish groups and possibly other conservative religious groups that hunker down and try to wait out the war without trying to change the war. Isolation is also a survival tactic.

Fighting Matrushkas - #3 - Armed Resistance - this is an opposite of isolation and assimilation. These are fighting Matrushkas. These are folks that have had enough and take up arms against the repressive regime. In Jesus' time - these were the Zealots, like Judas Iscariot and Barabbas who believed it was only an armed and violent uprising against Rome would set them free. As we see in Masada - armed resistance against Rome, while understandable, didn't work very well for the Zealots. In Anabaptism, these are the Muensterites who tried to take over the city of Muenster to bring God's kingdom through violence which also didn't turn out very well for them. It is also the Ukrainian Mennonite Selbstschutz Defense League that defended Mennonite villages which also didn't long term change the balance of power. In Howard Thurman's time - these are the Black Panthers and Malcolm X who started violent riots to protest oppression of African Americans. This also did not effectively change the balance of power in the US. In Ukraine - these are the Wolverines - the undercover resistance that blows up Russian tanks and other armed resistance as we have seen some Anabaptists in Ukraine are turning towards. Understandable but time will tell how effective they are.

Peace protesting Matrushkas - #4 - The final option is non-violent resistance which means sticking up for yourself, and standing up to regimes in confident, creative ways that often will get one killed or jailed but if there are enough who resist in this way - it can actually change the balance of power long term. In Jesus' time of course - this is Jesus who challenges the religious and political systems and gets killed for it but eventually it changed the balance of power. Within 300 years of persecution, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Unbelievable. In early Anabaptism in 1500s non-violent resistance of infant baptism and military service resulted in getting killed for it but eventually there was tolerance in Prussia and Switzerland. In Howard Thurman's time, it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and the non-violent civil rights movement that brought the vote to African Americans and de-segregated schools, changing power dynamics in the US and of course, the work goes on.

Slide - Ukraine also has a history of non-violent change of power in government. The Orange Revolution was a series of non-violent protests and political events that took place in Ukraine in the immediate aftermath of the run-off vote of the 2004 Ukrainian presidential election, which was claimed to be marred by massive corruption, voter intimidation and electoral fraud. Kyiv, the Ukrainian capital, was the focal point of the movement's campaign of civil resistance, with thousands of protesters demonstrating daily. Nationwide, the revolution was highlighted by a series of acts of civil disobedience, sit-ins, and general strikes organized by the opposition movement.

The nationwide protests succeeded when the results of the original run-off were annulled, and a revote was ordered by Ukraine's Supreme Court for 26 December 2004. Under intense scrutiny by domestic and international observers, the second run-off was declared to be "free and fair". Victor Yushchenko was declared the official winner and with his inauguration on 23 January 2005 in Kyiv, the Orange Revolution ended.

During the Russian control of East Germany, Poland, and the Baltic states - the churches were at the heart of the underground protest - quietly proclaiming through secret meetings and worship that God was greater than the state. "But working in secret, always with a nervous glance over the shoulder, they had succumbed to fear, the goal of communist control. In the 1980s and 90s, they made a conscious decision to change tactics. 'We will act as if we are free,

at all costs,” Christian dissidents of the Eastern Block countries decided. They began holding public meetings in church buildings, despite the presence of known informers. They signed petitions and distributed newspapers openly in the streets. In effect, the Christian dissidents started acting in the way they believed they should be able to act. If you want freedom of speech, speak freely. If you love the truth, tell the truth. The authorities did not know how to respond. Sometimes they cracked down - nearly all the Christian dissidents spent time in prison.

Christian dissidents were an alternative kingdom of ragged subjects of prisoners, poets and priests, who toppled the seemingly impenetrable fortress of the former Soviet Union. In each nation, the church operated as a counterforce, sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly insisting on a truth that transcended, and often contradicted, official propaganda. In Poland, the Catholics marched past government buildings shouting, “We forgive you!” In East Germany in 1992, Christians lit candles, prayed and marched in the streets until one night the Berlin Wall collapsed. Do you remember how shocking that was? We never thought that would happen. It was like the walls of Jericho coming down. Inspired by that the Estonians sang their way to the collapse of their communist government and the whole Soviet Union began collapsing like a house of cards. (What’s so Amazing About Grace, Yancey, p. 261. 262)

While few people in Russia speak out publicly against the war in Ukraine these days, more than half of Russians want peace, according to a poll by the independent Levada Center. That sentiment is finding new forms of expression, not so much in words, as in action. Take for example, an initiative by many Russian citizens to help Ukrainian refugees travel to Europe. A similar underground railroad assists young Russian men fleeing the military draft. Another type of action is the unexpected popularity of a new book, ‘The End of the Regime: How Three European Dictatorships Ended,’ by exiled Russian scholar Alexander Baunov. Now in its fourth

printing, the book is about the return of democracy to three European countries (Spain, Greece and Portugal) after periods of dictatorship. The parallels to the regime of Russian President Vladimir Putin are obvious. Simply buying the book is a political statement, writes the author in *The New York Times*. “Russians have not stopped asking questions about what comes next after Putin,” he says.

Many Russians still signal their opposition to the invasion from tattoos to graffiti to yellow ribbons signaling the desire for soldiers to come home. Mr. Putin has been fighting a second war in Russia itself, writes Andrei Kolesnikov of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. More than a year into the war, dissent by many Russians is a cry for their country to be based on individual rights, rather than displays of national power...History tells us the most repressive and seemingly secure regimes can crumble, brought down by ordinary people demanding freedom.” (Fresh forms of dissent, *Christian Science Monitor*, p. 27, May 15, 2023). And the Christian church has played a key part in that history.

Howard Thurman has given us a helpful theological and historical framework for understanding the non-violent power of Jesus to bind up the broken-hearted and set the oppressed free. Let us challenge ourselves in these ways and pray for those who struggle with these convictions on the frontlines: You who open doors and dismantle barriers, open our hearts to praise you, that we might live the full truth of who we are, that we might live as neighbours and friends, no longer strangers and enemies; open our hearts to the transforming power of your love, that we might forgive and reconcile, making peace and learning war no more, that we might be your people, one body in one Spirit, to tell your grace to all the world. We pray in the name of the One who walked among us as brother and friend. Amen. #862