

Sermon: Impudent and Stubborn

Year B, Proper 9

[Ezekiel 2:1-5; Psalm 123; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13](#)

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I love this country. I was born on an Army base in West Germany. For some of you here today, yes, there was once an East and a West Germany and for others of you here today, thank you for making sure there was a West Germany for me to be born in. I don't know how it works now, but back then, I got a German birth certificate and an Army Form FS240: Notification of American Birth Abroad. When I was old enough to be vaccinated, 8 weeks, 12 weeks, whatever it was, the Army shipped my mom and I back to the States and my dad to a little country no one had heard of, called Vietnam. So my first passport picture is of a rather adorable chubby infant who is not terribly thrilled with being propped up for the photo. Instead of a picture of my face, it's pretty much of the whole me.

When I was 15, I was going to go study in Spain for a year, so I needed to get a new passport. My parents, like many good parents, wanted me to learn how to do things with big bureaucracies, so I had to fill out the forms myself, and of course, I had to go into Boston with them to the Passport Office. Back then, you couldn't get a passport from the post office.

When we were called forward to the window, the young clerk took over the conversation. "Application" and I passed him my passport application form, where I had clearly stated that I had been issued a U.S. passport in the past. He got to my place of birth, Munich, West Germany, and handed it back to me. I was in the wrong line, the wrong department. I couldn't get a U.S. passport because I wasn't a citizen. I can still remember that moment. I was in shock and everything was turned upside down and I wasn't going to get to study in Spain and I was a U.S. citizen and I didn't have a green card. I was confused and I was scared. Everything seemed so wrong.

My dad gently moved me to one side and began to talk to the clerk very politely. Very politely, but very firmly. The clerk dug in. Dad asked to speak with his supervisor. The clerk refused. Dad refused to leave until he did. The clerk went off in a huff. The supervisor came over all, "What seems to be the problem here?" And in thirty seconds, Dad slid my original passport over, my Army FS 240 then my application, and finally my birth certificate that is entirely in German. The supervisor blinked, turned to the pouting clerk and said, "let me show you how to enter these kinds of applications" and a month later my passport appeared in the mail.

I love this country. Not because it always does the right thing, but because when one of us comes face to face with another one of us and is willing to listen, things happen. Neither the supervisor nor my dad were going to embarrass the young clerk for not knowing how to enter my strange set of paperwork. But they also weren't going to allow him to get away with not seeing me as an individual just because he hadn't learned that part of his job..

Ezekiel was called by God to face a group of Israelites who were impudent and stubborn (Ezekiel 2:4). I love this country because we are stubborn too. Oh at times we are stubborn in ways that are completely counterproductive, but then there is always another group of us being equally stubborn in the other direction. And our very stubbornness keeps us in conversation with one another. Admittedly, when we cluster in great groups and just yell at each other, it's not really conversation, but when we are willing to get one-on-one, we do often talk with one

another. We listen to one another and hear each other's stories. We change each other's hearts. We prophesy to one another.

Ezekiel was sent by God to speak to a stubborn and impudent people. And whether they heard him or not, they would know that there had been a prophet among them. (Ezekiel 2:5) Did you hear that earlier this week, a black woman, Bree Newsome, scaled the flag pole on the grounds of the South Carolina capitol and brought down the Confederate flag herself? She was assisted by a white man, James Tyson. They were both arrested and face a fine and possible jail time for defacing public property.

Did you hear that earlier this week someone tied a Confederate flag to the Shaw Memorial on the Boston Common that commemorates the accomplishments of the 54th Massachusetts Volunteers, a regiment of black soldiers who fought for the Union during the Civil War? It turns out that the flag had been set on fire, but the police stopped the flag burning, and the folks burning the flag had left it tied to the memorial as a tribute to the soldiers. Then other people came along later and were appalled that a Confederate flag was defacing the memorial and took it off and threw it in the trash.

Who are the prophets that are speaking to us today? Ms. Newsome who quoted Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation, of whom shall I be afraid?" James Tyson who accompanied her? The young man who led the flag burning in Boston or the woman from Lowell who threw it in the trash? Or was it the police who let the protests go on, make their point, but enforced the laws? Was it the leadership of Walmart and Amazon who said they would no longer sell merchandise with the flag on it? Was it Paul Thurmond, Strom Thurmond's son, a state senator in South Carolina who said it was time for the flag to go, a position no one would have expected from anyone in that family? Was it Brian France, the head of NASCAR saying the flag would not be welcome at their events?

One person who I will not accept as a prophet is Dylann Roof, the gunman at Mother Emmanuel who killed nine people in Bible study. I disagree strongly with President Obama when he said that Roof "didn't know he was being used by God."¹ God does not speak to us by killing nine people.

In today's reading from Mark, Jesus sends his disciples out to be prophets, to witness their faith in the world. Jesus knows that not everyone will be enlightened by their prophesy. Jesus tells them what to do when the people refuse to hear them, "shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." (Mark 6:11) Don't reload five times until nine people are dead. Shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them. Violence is not the answer. Violence is never the answer. God does not send prophets to speak to us through violence.

Jesus knows we are lousy at spotting the prophets among us. The people we know best are the ones we are least willing to accept as prophets. Maybe because we know their backstories, maybe because we know their parents, we won't accept that God might speak through them, even if they cast out demons and cure many who were sick by anointing them with oil. (Mark 6:13). Prophets say things that impudent and stubborn people don't want to hear. We wish they'd get going, start shaking a little dust at us and get out of our lives.

¹Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in Eulogy for the Honorable Reverend Clementa Pinckney", The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/26/remarks-president-eulogy-honorable-reverend-clementa-pinckney>, accessed July 1, 2015).

It's easy for us to spot the prophets on removing the Confederate flag from public life, at least in this part of the country. But what about on gay marriage and gun control, on health insurance and abortion and the death penalty. What about on pipelines and school funding? God is with us in our whole lives, not just the hour we spend together on Sunday morning. The prophets are there too and they can be really hard to spot.

The Israelites were in exile when Ezekiel became a prophet. The Israelites, impudent and stubborn as they were, were convinced that now that they were no longer living in the land that God had given them, God would not be able to find them. Yet there was Ezekiel. The Spirit was speaking through him. It was all Ezekiel could do to speak the words that were so difficult for his people to hear. God was with them, even if Ezekiel was saying things they don't want to hear.

I love this country because we can say things to each other that we don't want to hear. We can live with prophets and call them morons because they don't agree with us. We can live with prophets and chase them out of town. We can live with prophets and speak with them one on one and find out what's up with their prophesy and have our hearts broken open. But it is in the speaking and the listening that we change, provided we are impudent and stubborn enough to do so. May God bless America.