

*Fulfilling the Prophetic Imperative*  
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska  
UU Church of Minnetonka  
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**First Reading**

**From “The Prophethood of All Believers”**

**By James Luther Adams**

In the great ages of prophecy, the prophets (whether inside or outside the church) have been *foretellers* as well as *forthtellers*. They have been predictors – proclaimers of doom and judgment, heralds of new fulfillment. They have attempted to interpret the signs of the times and to see into the future. They have stood not only at the edge of their own culture but also before the imminent shape of new and better things to come...

A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. We have long held to the idea [first articulated by Martin Luther] of the *priesthood* of all believers, the idea that all believers have direct access to the ultimate resources of the religious life and that every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free persons. As an element of the radical laicism we need also a firm belief in the *prophethood* of all believers. The prophetic liberal church is not a church in which the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all the members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways.

**Second Reading**

**From *The Prophetic Imperative***

**By Dick Gilbert**

The prophetic imperative of the Unitarian Universalist church grows organically out of the doctrine of the liberal church...Imagine a circle within a circle. The center circle is worship, the celebration of the value experiences of life. Out of this spiritual center grows what we think and do as individuals and as a community. Our connectedness with the cosmos, world, history, and each other is confirmed and celebrated here. This is what James Luther Adams calls “centerstance in the midst of circumstance.”

...Worship derives from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe*, pointing to and celebrating that which is of worth. Religion is derived from the Latin, *religare* and means to bind together... this leads to an understanding of worship as a binding together or coming together of people to fashion ceremonies pointing to what they regard as of worth.

While the act of worship is in itself a religious activity of intrinsic worth, it is also instrumental in motivating and sustaining human efforts in serving the mandates of the prophetic imperative. It serves to strengthen and maintain commitment to social change by pointing to justice, freedom, equality, and the Beloved Community as ends to be sought.

...I do not understand corporate worship as simply one more means to rev up the troops for social change. ...if worship does not embody commitment to the Beloved Community, I take no delight in it. Somewhere between “playing church with bells and smells” and a political action meeting is the worshipping community nourishing itself for the work of the world. At its best, worship is an expression of, but not a substitute for, social responsibility. The religious life of the community in worship overflows into public ministry.

## **Sermon**

### ***Fulfilling the Prophetic Imperative***

**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

Last Sunday I presented my first “Question Box” service, during which I asked people to write down questions about the church, theology, or anything related to religion, and then to pass forward those slips of paper. I then answered on the spot from the pulpit. One question was, “How has having children changed, improved, or challenged your faith?” The general emphasis of my response was that – with a four-month-old and a two-and-a-half-year-old – I feel much more attuned to a sense of awe and wonder about the world. Part of a minister’s charge and calling is to attempt to view the world – and our place in it – from a more comprehensive perspective than our individual local lives allow. So being tuned in to a sense of awe and wonder is crucial for ministry.

But this past week, as I prepared for this social justice worship service, I realized that having children also deepened my desire to make this world as physically and emotionally healthy for them as possible – in the form of more compassionate human interactions in a more just social order on a planet we humans help to sustain and make beautiful.

Before I had kids, and certainly before I was married, all I had to worry about was myself. I could go out or arrange a trip on a moment’s notice. If I didn’t pay my bills on time, or if I left the house a mess, I was the only person affected. But when I was younger I also became very jaded and cynical. I felt that our politics – especially under Reagan and Bush – were shunting the most vulnerable people to the margins, and as a nation we reveled in getting as much “stuff” as we could get our hands on. And after working out west in outdoor programs for several years and seeing the destruction of logging and pollution, and after talking with my brother, who does research on global warming, I felt our planet was going to hell in a hand basket, and no one cared. Or if they, like me, did care, we weren’t strong enough or big enough to make a difference. I fell into the habit of thinking that my actions didn’t matter much. Even more, I felt that *I* didn’t matter much. I did a lot of adventuring, but I often felt that if I died, not many people would miss me, and that my passing would be like a puff of dust on the surface of the moon.

Having lived through that period of my life, however, I learned that being cynical is easy. Being annoyed and angered by other people is easy. Cutting someone down is easy. Bonding with another person because you both gripe about the same issue is easy. Dismissing something by saying it has been done before is easy. Telling someone that their great new idea will not work is easy. Saying what you don’t believe is easy. Disagreeing with someone else’s theology is easy. Being against a plan or a vision or a desire or an outcome is easy.

But in the handful of years I have been on this planet, I’ve learned that the more difficult life task is being creative. I’ve learned that the more difficult task is looking for beauty, and

when you find it, to know with a full heart and without a doubt that it is meaningful and essential. I've learned that the more difficult task is to articulate what you do believe. I've learned that the more difficult task is being angry with someone and still sitting with them at the table, agreeing to remain in relationship. The more difficult task is discovering a sense of power that is strong enough to construct a vision, create a plan, or develop a structure, building trust over time and sustaining a sense of hope.

As people of faith, these "more difficult tasks" are the precise tasks we are called to engage. As people of liberal religious faith, our desire for social justice is grounded in these more difficult tasks of building and sustaining relationships. The authority of our liberal religious call derives from more humanistic and naturalistic terms that articulate a transcendent standard for justice.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Micah says, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (6:8). The prophet Amos rails against temple ceremonies which overshadow ethical religion by saying, "I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. . . . But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:21, 24).

James Luther Adams, one of our great Unitarian theologians of the 20th Century, reminds us that the prophets were not just foretellers, but also *forthtellers*. He also expands on Martin Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers to become the prophethood of all believers, saying that, "The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in the light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all the members share the common responsibility to attempt to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of merely being pushed around by it. Only through the prophetism of all believers can we together foresee doom and mend our common ways."

In his book, *The Prophetic Imperative*, the Unitarian Universalist minister Dick Gilbert picks up where James Luther Adams left off, saying that "the prophetic church is a religious community that seeks to intervene in human history for the sake of social justice. . . . The imperative to be stressed here is that which emerges from the disciplines of freedom. Freedom is not merely the absence of restraint, but the will and capacity to act in one's environment. . . . Freedom, by its very nature, places an imperative claim on the free person to expand that freedom to all" (pp. 6-7).

During the two years I have been your minister, I have heard people in this congregation say repeatedly that you want to engage in more, and more effective, social justice work. Some of the questions we need to ask ourselves, then, as we walk down this road together are: With whom do we want to be in relationship as we work for justice? What relationships do we need to strengthen? What relationships do we need to develop? How do we want to be known in the community?

This fall we will have a chance to begin discussing, and more importantly, begin answering these questions. On the last weekend in September we are hosting an all-congregation Social Justice Empowerment workshop. The workshop will be facilitated by two leaders, Tom Esch, who is local and at one point worked as the Social Justice Coordinator at First Universalist Church in Minneapolis, and the Reverend Art McDonald, who is the minister of the First Universalist Church in Essex, Massachusetts.

On Friday night, September 25, and on Saturday, September 26, Tom Esch and Art McDonald will work with us and help us to envision and articulate some significant directions for our social justice engagement. Typically, we Unitarian Universalists are very good at working for individual rights. We are very good at wanting our own voice to be heard. We even place as our first principle on our list of seven, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” But we are not so good at figuring out how to do this together, as a corporate body, as an integrated beloved community. This Social Justice Empowerment workshop, on the other hand, will help us begin to work together as a community of liberal religious faith.

In order for the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Department of Congregational Advocacy and Witness to send us our two facilitators, they require that a proposed Social Justice Empowerment workshop have the backing of the leadership of the church, including the Social Justice Ministry, the Board, the Director of Religious Education, and the Minister. I have been in communication with the Department of Congregational Advocacy and Witness since May 2008 to help guide this program toward our congregation this fall, and the leadership of this congregation – the Board, the Social Justice Ministry, the Committee on Ministry, and the Director of Religious Education – are indeed strongly supporting this Empowerment workshop.

In addition, the Department of Advocacy and Witness asks that the congregation as a whole commit to having at least 20% of their membership attend the workshop. As a congregation of 212 members, that would mean having at least 40 people attend. Because of the energy and desire to work for social justice in this congregation, I have no question that we will have 40 of our people there – and I suspect that we will have even more. And this workshop isn’t limited to just our members – friends of the congregation can attend, too.

We have two tools to help you participate in the workshop this fall. The first is the short questionnaire in your order of service. Your responses will help our facilitators tailor their work with us so that we will have a more meaningful weekend with them. Please complete this form by the end of the service and deposit it in the collection basket.

After the worship service, you will notice a large easel in the North Room with a row of sign-up sheets. Until the Social Justice Empowerment workshop two months from now, those sign-up sheets will be hanging there for people to sign their names and commit to attending. Remember, this workshop will help us define who we are in the world and who we are as a religious institution in Wayzata. Social justice work isn’t just about what one small group does in one small corner of the church. Social justice work – or the noticeable lack of it – conveys who we are as a people and what we are doing here.

No matter what we tell the world we believe, we will be known for what we do or do not do. If, as our history informs us, we helped create Interfaith Outreach and Community Partners 30 years ago, but are not involved with them today, we will be known for our place in history – but not as an engaged and active presence in this town today. The Social Justice Empowerment workshop will help us to put our actions where we say our beliefs are. When we merge our actions with our beliefs, we make a powerful and meaningful statement about our identity. We walk our talk. Who we believe and say we are in our head and heart is how we will be known by the world through the actions of our hands and feet.

The world today is full of nuance. We are moving away from tribal bonds and toward a greater awareness of our interrelated world. The words of John Donne some 400 years ago – in the male dominated language of the time – still echo through time as humanity still aspires toward awareness of the truth he spoke, that, “All mankind is of one author, and is one volume...As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon

the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all...No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Church life is centered on worship, but we couldn't imagine ourselves to be a congregation without religious education or spiritual care. Similarly, we need to know that we cannot be a community of liberal faith without service, advocacy and justice. Each one of these – worship, religious education, spiritual care, and justice – is nuanced, intertwined, and involves each one of us.

This is exactly the wisdom Dick Gilbert attempts to impart. He asks us to imagine the congregation as a circle within a circle, where the center circle is worship, and "Out of this spiritual center grows what we think and do as individuals and as a community. Our connectedness with the cosmos, world, history, and each other is confirmed and celebrated here." Worship, he says, "Serves to strengthen and maintain commitment to social change by pointing to justice, freedom, equality, and the Beloved Community as ends to be sought."

Our worship today is indeed both prophetic and "pointing to justice, freedom, equality, and the Beloved Community as ends to be sought." Yet we will need to be mindful that our way – that is, what we care about most – is not the only way. Given the nuance of the world and the intertwined nature of our human relationships, social justice work these days depends not on individualism, but upon how well we work together with other people. In the words of Susan Leslie, the Director of Congregational Advocacy and Witness at the Unitarian Universalist Association, "Making a difference today requires being able to work in coalitions across faith, race and class, and to partner with marginalized groups."

With our blinders of individualism firmly attached to our Unitarian Universalist heads, it will be easy for us to rush to judgment about what is wrong with the world and what needs to be done to fix it. With the blinders of individualism on, we will think that the most pressing needs are the ones we care about the most. With our blinders of individualism on we will dismiss interfaith social justice gatherings that include prayer, and we will work alone fantasizing that our congregation of 200 people can do all the work to save the world.

If we honestly wish to be a faith community genuinely involved in social justice, we must enter into it with eyes wide open, with the blinders taken off, and with the certain knowledge that our assumptions will be challenged, our good will and theology questioned, and our faith severely shaken. If we honestly wish to be a faith community genuinely involved in social justice, we must listen and engage the needs and the voices of those who are marginalized in our society, lest we marginalize them even more by telling them we know what they need.

Our reward for honest and genuine social justice engagement will be the knowledge that we are fulfilling the prophetic imperative to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly in our relationship with all the forces in the universe beyond our control. Our reward for honest and genuine social justice engagement will be a deeper and more meaningful relationship with our neighbors and with the world. Our reward will be pain and joy and a deeper experience of the human condition. Our reward will be an altered social order that expands freedom to all. Our reward will be a release from cynicism and an increase of love in the world. Our reward, like one of the best rewards of having children, will be a greater sense of awe and wonder about humanity and our planet, elated by the fact that we have the good fortune to be part of it.