

**The Second Source:
Words and deeds of prophetic women and men
which challenge us to confront powers and
structures of evil with justice, compassion,
and the transforming power of love**

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I could just enumerate some women and men, describe their words and deeds, and be done with it. But that would be the easy way out. We all know who these people are. Our lists may differ somewhat – for example, some of you may have Mother Theresa on yours, but I don't – and maybe no one has John Lennon on their list, but he's on mine. We could spell out what Margaret Sanger did that was so courageous. Or describe the compassion that Sister Helen Prejean (pray-shaun) showed in counseling that Dead Man Walking guy. Or how the forgiveness that Gandhi showed towards his tormentors transformed them to change their hearts and minds.

But I didn't want this talk to be the product of a giant google marathon. Instead I wanted to take the opportunity to think through some of the ideas in this second source – take it apart, and put it back together again.

So first let's look at some of these words and see if I know what they are talking about here.

**Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which
challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with
justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love**

“Words and deeds”. Well that’s pretty easy. What you say and what you do. And I would argue that words are also what you do, they are actions as well, whether they are written or spoken or whispered or shouted from the rooftops. You’ll note that it’s not “words and deeds and thoughts”. Thoughts are important – leading as they can, to words and actions – but no one hears you think (and I hope future advances in technology don’t render that untrue). It’s only what you say and do that can affect our mutual lives and have an impact on the rest of society.

Ok, next. Well, darn, I didn’t get very far. I’m stuck on “prophetic.”

1 : of, relating to, or characteristic of a prophet or prophecy

2 : foretelling events : predictive

[Carnac thing.]

Do the people in our second source foretell events, or are they acting like prophets, that is, manifesting prophecy? We could say that in many cases, they are predictive of future morés, they are ahead of their time, they spoke out against slavery at a time when it was not seen as the horrendous brutal thing that it is, they championed reproductive rights before it was cool. That is certainly courageous. But does it make them prophetic? What is prophecy? A prophet is a person who “makes God’s will particularly clear, whether or not doing so involves making any predictions about the future.” Let me tell you, don’t ever google the word prophecy. You’ll get end-of-times prophecies, the Mayan Prophecy of the winter solstice of 2012, the Red Heifer that will show up at armageddon, Scientology (hey did you know they were predicting a spaceship arriving on October 14th? -- I guess I missed that -- at least, it wasn’t in the New York Times), and all sorts of lunatic fringe views of the future.... Your brain may just explode.

So, let's concentrate on the part about "making God's will clear". As a nontheist, I can't say that even if there IS a God there is a will involved that has to be made clear. But I see this not as the "God's will" that you have to submit to, but as God's enlightened ideas that you have to get on board with. I don't particularly care whether they are God's ideas or man's. But there is a distinct progression of ideas and moral beliefs throughout the history of western civilization (this may also apply to cultures other than my own, but my knowledge of those is spotty at best). This progression is not always reliably forward-moving. Like evolution, it proceeds in fits and starts – punctuated equilibrium if you will. The democracy and elevated philosophical thinking of Ancient Greece was followed in none too short order by the Dark Ages and the Inquisition. After that we had the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, in which science and reason got some respect, but social equality was definitely still on the back burner.

So, the "prophetic" part is more about being ahead of your time, trying to go where the human race is evolving to. You want to be part of the punctuation, not the equilibrium. And I for one would rather be a question mark than a period.

"Women and men." Well at least they got the order right. I could go on a lengthy tangent about what it's like to be a woman and grow up and live with the constant implication that 50 percent of the human race is an afterthought. Maybe they did this for reverse alphabetical order reasons. Growing up as a Davis I never gave it much thought until I had two kids whose last names began with a T. How come we don't start with Z and go to A more often?
Karen????

Here's where I could enumerate my own heroes, or ask you to name yours. The "women and men" part of this source provides a big well to draw from for our children's religious education curriculum. American education has trouble enough squeezing in all the facts and figures, dates of battles, the Missouri Compromise, and "Article I, Section 8, Clause 18" (that last one an example of my ninth grade Civics teacher's successful pedagogical method of repetition-repetition-repetition!). Using these notable prophets, visionaries, and curmudgeons, we hold out great examples of righteous and creative behavior and beliefs to our children.

Now we come to the verb phrase of this sentence fragment. This is where all the action is.

"Challenge." I was surprised to learn that the root of this word is related to *cal'umny*, to accuse falsely. So, the more traditional meaning is to call into account or dispute, especially as being unjust, invalid, or outmoded; to impugn; to question the right or validity in a legal way, like a juror or a voter. The more modern meaning of this word is to provide a stimulating task or problem, as in a challenging math problem, a challenging golf course: "Kids don't do well in school unless we *challenge* them." Hey, it's a code word for HARD! And what follows is indeed hard:

"Confront evil." I won't read you the dictionary definition of *confront* but it comes from the Latin for forehead; thus you can't confront evil unless you come face-to-face with it. "Confront" implies opposition that is public. You can't work behind the scenes to confront evil. Herein lies the prescriptivist nature of the second source: while the other five sources provide mental and emotional nourishment for our continuing individual spiritual journeys, THIS source provides not just fodder in the form of inspiring people of the past, but an exhortation: go out and do good. And is

confronting evil enough? Don't we want to vanquish, annihilate, obliterate, crush it?

So what is this evil we are supposed to confront? Wow, did I get in over my head. More effort has been expended attempting to define evil, explain evil, reconcile evil with the existence of god, categorize evil, and so on than any other religious topic save the existence of God itself.

I'll just say evil is like art, and perhaps also like pornography: I can't define it but I know it when I see it.

Let's note that we are talking about the powers and structures of evil. Not evil persons. This fits nicely with our First Principle, affirming the worth and dignity of every person. It's nice to be consistent.

It is a popular tenet of modern psychotherapy and also the modern Christian right, "Love the sinner, hate the sin" – we are not our actions. So does confronting evil involve actual combat with live persons? Aren't the powers and structures of evil promulgating and used by actual persons? In some cases entire societies perhaps. Separating the evil act from the perpetrator makes it easier for us to concentrate on removing the cause of the evil.

Let's take it one step further. The evil is not inherent in the action. The evil manifests in the consequences. To take a lame example, I give a child a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Is the child hungry? I'm good. Is the child extremely allergic to peanuts? I'm bad.

Hmm. The badness also derives from intent. Did I know the child had a peanut allergy and wanted to see him die?

So confronting evil from the point of view of utilitarianism and relativism, and reason, is a complicated business, and we don't want to be making a mistake.

But confronting evil from an emotional, compassion angle is simple. Do you feel bad for the victims of evil? Does it outrage you, disgust you, scare you? Then do something about it. If the evil power or structure or practice is making someone else hurt, it is worth confronting. Absence of empathy, I feel, is the source of evil. Empathy is the capacity to recognize, accept, and cherish in other persons the experience, feelings, and aspirations that one is aware of in oneself. Intentional acts that violate the empathetic principles of love and fairness are the evil we are talking about.

The building blocks of evil in any given society are: greed, racial, religious, and class prejudices, ignorance, selfishness, condescension, separation from the community, poverty, lack of earnest public education, social and economic conditions in which the value of humankind is replaced with commercial profits, media which constantly bombard us with messages of fear, hate, violence, and greed.

Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Justice is the civic or political form of love." And, I would add, a form of empathy. To me, justice is mainly fairness. Traditionally, justice with a capital J concerns itself with the proper allocation of things - wealth, power, reward, respect – among people in a society. But how is this accomplished? Should it be strictly egalitarian, based on need, merit, contribution to the society, how long your family's been here? Justice deals not with good and evil but with Rightness. Does justice come because of rules laid forth by the government in power? Oops, no, a government can be tyrannical, or illegitimate. It's not merely following the rules that brings justice. Justice is derived from the mutual agreement of everyone concerned – the "consent of the governed," to quote a dusty old document. A utilitarian like John

Stuart Mill would say what is Right is what has the best consequences (usually measured by what results in the greatest average wellbeing). Psychologists would say that our need for a just world proceeds from two natural human tendencies: our desire to retaliate against those who hurt us, and our ability to put ourselves empathetically in another's place. A lawyer or judge would say justice is shown by respecting the rights of a suspect or defendant, protecting the legal interest of the victim, and ensuring the welfare of the society

Fairness, empathy, compassion. All forms of love.

With love, we transform the subject (ourselves), the object (the other), and we transform the relationship. I can't believe I'm resorting to a Disney example, but: Beauty sees a horrible Beast, allows love to enter her heart, transforming herself, and in turn, transforming the Beast, and the relationship. That love was not something that happened to her, via Cupid's arrow, external and unbidden. It was something she allowed to happen, orchestrated, willed even. It was a conscious act.

But is it possible to apply the transforming power of love to relationships between nations and peoples? Love in our culture is equated with weakness, compromise, and lack of conviction. It's gooey and floppy and namby-pamby. Most public institutions -- governments, corporations -- trivialize, ignore, or deny the validity, importance, and pragmatic value of love and forgiveness in organizational life. When was the last time you forgave a co-worker who stole your idea or did something to make you look bad or got you in dutch with the boss? The last fender-bender you were in where you apologized to the other idiot -- er driver - even if it wasn't your fault? Yet when forgiveness and generosity have been practiced between warring and reconciling nations and groups, the result is better for both. One of the best examples is the help and support (which sure looks and smells like forgiveness and

generosity) the U.S. showed toward Japan and Germany after World War II. The effort invested in that rehabilitation was worth it in terms of our moral standing in the world – not to mention the bonus in economic prosperity, which helped more than just the recipients.

This is the kind of love that knows that an eye for an eye just leaves two maimed people, that violent retaliation for violence just leads to more violence in an ever-escalating and dehumanizing spiral. The only power that breaks the cycle is – surprise – the power of love. Love, empathy, compassion, generosity, everything of that ilk -- transforms, liberates, opens a path when you're stuck. Love is the *only* thing that works when it's reconciliation you are after.

If love is so powerful then, let's get more of it into the world. Although few of us are able to love unconditionally every living being, it's something we can work on, to do better. With practice, we can dare to find new ways to open up to ever greater levels of love. Some things that benefit from a little practice: be quick to forgive, slow to judge; be willing to put others' needs first; look at people, meet their eyes, imagine that they are a lot like you.

Ultimately, confronting evil, challenging injustice, creating love, are everyday works. It's not something that you write in your planner for Thursday at 2 pm.

We are indeed inspired by prophetic women and men. I haven't gone through a list of people famous for confronting evil, promoting justice, and demonstrating compassion. You can write up that list on your own. And you can also be on that list. Because it's not just a historical survey. It's a to-do list.

This second source is not talking about famous people. It's talking about us.

BIO

Mariann Maene has been a member of our congregation since the second public meeting, in 1999, and signed the membership book on Charter Sunday in 2000. Raised a Catholic, she's attended Episcopal and Methodist churches but has always been suspicious of religion.

Her approach to the world has always featured skepticism and reason, and now in midlife is realizing that more time needs to be spent on trust and emotion.

She let Barbara talk her into doing one of our series on the six sources.

Kids

**Today the grownups are going to talk a little bit about heroes.
And I was just wondering about who your heroes might be.
So, think a moment about someone you admire, someone you
look up to, maybe a hero to you.**

**You might have more than one hero but just think about just
one for now.**

When you have the person in your mind, sit down.

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about that person.

Is that person famous or just somebody you know?

Is that person alive or dead?

Is that person a man or a woman?

**Do you admire that person because of who they are or what
they do or did?**

**Do you think you could be like that person?
Why or why not?**

Ok now you can tell me who your person is.