



This Prophetic Task:
A Round Table Conversation on Grief and Hope

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Mark Ramsey: Hi, this is Mark Ramsey of the Ministry Collaborative, here with my colleague, Beth Daniel. All of our other colleagues are out doing ministry in all sorts of places, and so it's just Beth and me, but we get to have a great conversation today. Hi, Beth.

Beth Daniel: Hey, I hope we do. This is fun.

Mark: We're going to center this on a quote from the late Walter Brueggemann:

"The prophetic tasks of the church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair."

Beth, I know we want to pull this apart, but what's your initial reaction to that?

Beth: You know, we've talked a lot as a team – and with people in our network – about prophetic witness, or proclamation, or preaching, recently. This is a real pressure point that we've discussed multiple times, and it's important. And, honestly, when you sent me your quote, I thought, "Oh, this could be repetitive. Like, we've already pushed on this so much." What I loved about this quote when I first read it was that it seems to expand the understanding and interpretation of what the prophetic task is. Oftentimes right now – not just in the church, but also in culture – it seems to be the loudest voice is claiming truth. And that's along the spectrum of all political lines and theological lines. And what I loved about this quote was it causes us to pause and unpack a little bit about what Brueggemann, at least here, talks about as prophetic and what is the task; because it's so much more than the person who's speaking. This is the church, and there's several elements in this category of task that we need to really examine and deserve our attention.

Mark: Yeah. I love what you're picking up there. This is a corporate prophetic task, not an individual prophetic task. And, look: we'll pause it right off the bat. It is a stressful...And as one person I really respect said last week talking about these days, "It is a stern time." It's really hard. And it's hard for pastors and for churches. But, I've had a lot of conversations with pastors. It's not our job to go, "Oh, I need to be prophetic." Actually, scripturally, people are drag kicked and screaming into prophecy, and yet God equips them. But it is least as much the case that God equips a community to face these things as God equips an individual. And I'm a little suspicious when any of us chooses this as a singular voice instead of a corporate voice. We need each other.

So, let's pull this apart a little bit. The first of the three is "truth in a society that lives in illusion."

Beth: I mean, even that: we live in a world where everything has to be redefined. Everyone thinks they're speaking truth. So, first of all, what is the truth that the church is supposed to speak? And you think that's a given until you start having conversations, and it's really not. But the other thing that I think we can surely agree on is we are bombarded with alternative facts and questioning. I mean, Adam Borneman wrote about this a few weeks ago, just what is real? Like, this idea that we're living in illusion seems very timely. Brueggemann did not write this today, but it applies so well to today.

And I thought a lot about the verse in 2 Timothy, where it says, “The time will come where people will turn away and have itching ears and will listen just to what they want to hear.” And then there’s this call in the midst of that, this charge: “But you do your work, you do your ministry fully.”

So, even in this sentence of speaking the truth or telling the truth in a society that lives in illusion, I think it’s...we do live in illusion. We’re trying to work out what is true and what is not. But Mark, you were a pastor for many years. You are a pastor. You’re always a pastor. But if you were going to say, like, what is the truth? Everyone’s claiming to have the truth, including in the church. Every word that comes from us, we are claiming is the truth. And we’re in a pickle in the church, not just in society, on how to do that.

Mark: Yeah. I think illusion has been accelerated in the course of my ministry. There’s the illusions of self-narrative. I mean, we really do all believe that we are fascinating beyond the truth we get from others; or indeed the truth we get from God. And I think that’s really dangerous when we only rely on ourselves and our own compass. There have always been illusions of control; that’s one doctor office visit away from being shattered. I think we’ve also got, and this is what I think you’re pointing to, the illusions of what has meaning and depth. And so, I am thinking with truth, you know, when Pilate mockingly says, “Well, what is truth?” Jesus is standing right in front of him, the embodied truth. I think it is hard in a world of algorithms to trust a truth that comes beyond ourselves, or comes beyond our screens, and to actually sit with that. I would also return back to: it’s why we need community. I need you all to help me understand what truth is. I’m not going to get it myself.

Beth: Yeah. I think you pointed at something there of it being corporate. And earlier you mentioned about those people who were eager to be prophets. That’s always a dangerous thing, especially when you look at Scripture.

There was an interview that you did on a podcast with Tom Long and Cynthia Hale about preaching. And Tom Long said something that really struck me. He said, “The Word comes to us, not from us.” And it seems such a simple phrase; but I think it gets to what you’re saying of, the pressure for people to stand up and be prophetic: that’s an illusion in and of itself. This idea that I need to feel pressure to say something prophetic. The Word comes to us, not from us. The Word that Brueggemann talks about, the prophetic task, is communal. And so, there’s this burden for the church, not the person. And the burden is just to tell the truth. And if we find ourselves in a pulpit shouting about our opinions or our beliefs, it’s not that it’s wrong, but there needs to be some humility of: is it prophetic? Prophetic is a particular kind of message, I think, from the Divine, that you will have a burden to tell the people.

Mark: Where I see vital churches, I see this happening: that a lot of the non-pulpit time in church is spent on this, around tables, in small groups, where we are struggling together to get there. Instead of, “Let any of us speak from on high.” That’s a difficult thing.

“We grieve in a society that practices denial.”

Beth: Yeah, this is so good. This is so good. And I don’t want to bash Americans, being a British person. I’m sure we’re terrible at it, too, but I do think there is kind of an unusual resistance to grief here. And grief is not just through death, it’s through all kinds of loss. When I went home to a funeral one time, and the casket is open in the living room, and the family is gathered around it, and we’re singing, and then we walk out from the house with the casket down the street, still singing; I remember Thomas just

saying, “Well, that’s so weird. That’s just so weird that, you’re kind of, sitting and dwelling in this moment of death...” Whereas, here we just tend to hide it away and bury it. It’s just different, but there is this aversion to feeling grief and pain, I think.

And, the crazy thing is our faith has grief and pain at the center of it. Good Friday is real. Good Friday is not when the churches are packed, but Good Friday is real, and we have to be able to recognize and even encourage the process of grief in a society that practices denial as if it’s not there, or as if it’s just passing...jumps too quickly beyond it.

Mark: Yeah. Well, and denial doesn’t work. That’s the thing. And grief takes a lot of forms. Elizabeth and I are teaching Adult Ed. right now in the church we worship here in Charlottesville, and we’re doing words that Easter reshapes, or reforms: a vocabulary of faith. And we did recognition with the Emmaus story. And we did hope, very small topic, last Sunday. And what’s the difference between hope and optimism, and how does Easter reshape hope and ground hope? And we touched on grief because, particularly in Paul, in Romans 8, “The sufferings of this present world...” I mean, he grounds hope in suffering.

And one woman said, “I am grieving that what I’ve worked for my entire life is being shattered.” This was a woman who is probably in the last chapter of her life, and she’s looking back with this profound grief. I’m more aware, I think, in the last few years at the multiple facets of grief in our lives, and the multiple webs of relationships that lead to grief. Of course, it’s loss of a loved one. Of course it is; but it’s also the loss of a faith of a better world, or frankly, of progress. And we need to deny that, and get back to the grief. And yet it is a profoundly deep feeling.

Beth: I love that image of that woman having the courage to say that in a group. And, you know, we encourage this even in our cohorts. But the tendency, even for pastors in the church, to jump in and fix it, or to make someone feel better about it. And there’s something so beautiful and holy about making space, and just letting it be.

I love that you expanded the idea of grief away from just the loss of a loved one, because that also is in our faith. I mean, Genesis tells us that God was deeply grieved by our wickedness, and in the Garden, Jesus was overcome with sorrow about what was happening. I mean, this is a really important...it’s not just emotion, it’s a state of being that we need, as the church, to do better, I think, about encouraging and also making space. And again, I find it fascinating that Brueggemann in this quote considers that a prophetic task. Like, that is so different than my initial understanding of what the prophetic task of the church is. What does that say that it’s revealing a Divine Will, or that it’s communicating something between God and us to make space for grief?

Mark: Yeah. So, in this quote, he moves from truth to grief to hope: “Express hope in a society that lives in despair.”

Beth: Yeah. It’s interesting that you mentioned that hope was different from optimism in something that you and Elizabeth just did. I was just with a cohort, and we had the exact conversation about the difference between hope and optimism is very much like the difference between joy and happiness. You know, it is way beyond circumstance, and what we can conjure up from what’s around us. And this group, particularly, used 1 Peter, and tied it in with holiness: that we are holy, because God is holy. But earlier on in that 1 Peter passage, it talks about the importance of hope. And they were tying together that we really are set aside for hope. Again, it’s prophetic. It’s something very different.

Mark: Desmond Tutu, in a lot of his writings and his ministry in South Africa, talked about being a prisoner of hope. He's the one who said, "I don't believe much in optimism, but I'm a prisoner of hope." And we actually used that in this class, too. And there was a lot of good conversation about, "Are we confined by hope? Are we constrained by hope?" But a "prisoner of hope" means, in my hearing, we don't get around it, but we must give attention to it. And I think there's a lot of attention being given to despair right now. And, of course, all these things have roots and antecedents and contexts, but I want to hear more about hope and less about despair. I think we've got the despair thing down in this culture. We're pretty proficient in being able to parse despair, and we're leaving hope on the side of the road. And we shouldn't.

Beth: Yeah. I mean, and it really is tied with the grief that we just spoke about. 1 Thessalonians reminds us that we grieve. It's real, but we don't grieve as those without hope. And, I think in the church – talk about being prophetic – to remind people that, yes, grief and loss is real, that it should not be denied. We should have space for it. But we're a faith of resurrection. We are a faith of redemption. And it will not have the last word. Even if that is prophetic in a way that is looking outward in the future, it's not yet. It is coming. Surely we have to not just preach that word because again, this is a communal prophetic task, but as the church, be reminders to each other that all shall be well.

Mark: Beth and I were saying, this isn't a round table, this is a bistro table. We've just pulled up another chair for our producer, Marthame Sanders, to come in. Marthame, you just said a really important thing.

Marthame Sanders: I have loved this conversation. And the thing that strikes me, Mark, you said, I think we've done really good at despair. I'm not sure we've done well at despair in our society – and I'm speaking of the American society – as well as we have done complaint. And I think there's a distinction. When I say that, I'm speaking about the dominant aspects of society – identity, financial, etc. – of it's not what I want. I'm not getting what I want. We are really good at complaining. And I think there's a difference between complaint and despair, and there's a difference between despair and grief.

Mark: I think that's a really good insight. And I think it goes back to why we desperately need community. I can sink myself into: "If only people would agree with me and look at the world like I do, everything would work out fine." But there's also a sense in which I'm going to complain and complain and complain because I feel okay. It is the community that pulls me out of that. It's the community that says, "We have bigger things to worry about."

Even legitimate complaints. Many years ago as a young adult, I was seeing a pastoral counselor, and she finally said to me, after I had gone on with a litany of complaints, she's like, "You seem to understand that really well. Now what?" That was actually a change in my life to hear that, because it's like, "Yeah, that's fine. And now what are you going to do? You know it. Now what are you going to do about it?"

And we are called to get up and moving for the sake of truth and grief and hope, not just wallow in it or circle. And there's a lot of circling the same things right now. And they are important things, but they're not ultimate things. And I think that's my concern.

Beth: You know, ultimately, what I think I love about this quote from Brueggemann (and he has many) is that it is so perfect for this Eastertide. Like, this is a very cruciform quote. Mark, you've said this multiple times: the only unique thing the church has to offer is Christ crucified and resurrected. And that's the truth that we have. And to think of that as a collective, communal, prophetic task is both incredibly

encouraging for those people who will feel pressured to individually declare themselves as prophets, but also is a conviction and a call for those of us who are sitting in the pews and realize we're a part of this prophetic task, too.