

5/29/20

Rabbi Abraham Heschel is someone at whose feet I study. A fierce and unrelenting voice for justice, he lived, prayed, taught, and led from a place of deep compassion, joy, and love. He is widely recognized as one of the wisest theologians and great prophets of our time. I aspire to developing even a fraction of the power of his luminous, proactive empathy in my own life and leadership.

If you aren't familiar with Heschel, his daughter Susannah has compiled a remarkable collection of his writings in *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essential Writings*, and it includes a wonderful introduction about him and his life's work. Susannah writes, "I am still amazed by my father's courage, after losing his family in the war, to fall in love, marry and have a child....I must add: he was never depressed, never moody or withdrawn or melancholy. Our family home was filled with laughter, jokes and playfulness.... Despair is forbidden, he used to say. God is everywhere and never gives us a task without also giving us the strength to carry it out."

I am especially awake this morning to my yearning to draw nearer to the example he lived. Today is my birthday. My 51st. I am alive and serving God as part of an inspiring, love-infused, healthy congregation that genuinely seems to want to live meaningfully into God's call in our lives: to seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. And this Sunday is Pentecost, the day the Spirit alighted like tongues of sacred flame on the lives of the believers, the Church's birthday.

This week, we have seen violence escalating along the fault lines of our society, wounds opening wider where "essential employees" and neighbors' perceptions of "personal freedom" collide, leaders stoking fires of disharmony and injustice, and protests erupting in flames...are these not the flames of God's Pentecost Spirit?

As I awaken to this new day and look forward to Pentecost this Sunday, I find myself wondering anew who God is calling me and the church to be. I also feel poignantly aware of my privilege in asking this question, and the responsibility that comes with that privilege ("to whom much is given, much is expected...").

Rabbi Heschel urged us to cultivate our inner lives in order to deepen our awareness of God's searching for us. He wrote, "Awareness of the divine begins with wonder." His words speak with relevance to our churches today: "Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion -- its message becomes meaningless. Religion is an answer to humanity's ultimate questions. [We need] to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer."

Heschel taught that radical amazement and awe, combined with sincere embarrassment at all we have overlooked, can lead us to living into our part in God's ongoing call in the world and understanding with deep empathy the prophetic voices of our day.

Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor. God is raging in the prophet's words. In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet's work: in his words, the invisible God becomes audible. Divine power bursts in his words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal.

To a person endowed with prophetic sight, everyone else appears blind; to a person whose ear perceives God's voice, everyone else appears deaf. The prophet hates the approximate; he shuns the middle of the road. Carried away by the challenge, the demand to straighten out humanity's ways, the prophet is strange, one-sided, an unbearable extremist.

Others may suffer from the terror of cosmic aloneness; the prophet is overwhelmed by the grandeur of divine presence. The prophet disdains those for whom God's presence is comfort and security; to him it is a challenge, an incessant demand. God is compassion, not compromise; justice, though not inclemency.

The prophet's word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven. The prophet faces a coalition of callousness and established authority and undertakes to stop a mighty stream with mere words. The purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner person as well as to revolutionize history. The prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible.

It is embarrassing to be a prophet. There are so many pretenders, predicting peace and prosperity, offering cheerful words, adding strength to self-reliance, while the prophet predicts disaster, pestilence, agony, and destruction. People need exhortations to courage, endurance, confidence, fighting spirit, but Jeremiah proclaims: You are about to die if you do not have a change of heart and cease being callous to the word of God.

The prophet is a person who suffers the harm done to others. Wherever a crime is committed, it is as if the prophet were the victim and the prey. All prophecy is one great exclamation: God is not indifferent to evil!

"Let there be a grain of prophet in everyone!" Heschel concluded.

As I live into my next year, and as the church lives together into our next trip around the sun, Heschel's words speak poignantly and powerfully to our moment. I hear God's prayer for the church in his words. It is my prayer for myself that I can live lovingly into them, and find ways to partner lovingly with our church and our community in finding a grain of the prophet within ourselves and cultivating it tenaciously and lovingly to grow.

Love and blessings, and Happy Birthday!

Heather