

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany - February 9, 2025

Proverbs 8:1–4, 10–17; Psalm 111; James 3:13–18 ; Luke 7:18–35

“The Prophet in the Desert”

1. I met my friend and neighbor Leland soon after I came to FPC.
 - a. I learned so much from him just listening to him, just walking through life with him.
 - i. He passed away last year, 3 days shy of turning 81.
 - ii. He liked to come by the church and chat with Brook and me.
 - iii. He had some close friends in the church, like Cara.
 - iv. He would come to Hot Meals on Fridays.
 - b. Leland was a wiry thin man, but I wouldn't let that fool you because he had been a cement man for many years, and his arms were strong. And he had a big heart, which was especially true with how he loved his young adult grandson.
 - i. He even let his grandson stay with him.
 - ii. But that was a challenge, because his grandson had substance use disorder, and at times he got violent, and was in and out of jail.
 - iii. On more than one occasion, his grandson beat Leland severely.
 - iv. Once he put him in the hospital and honestly I didn't think he would pull through, but he did.
 - c. One time I visited Leland at an apartment he rented near here, at a time when his grandson was living with him, and tensions with the grandson were beginning to escalate once more.
 - i. He had called me to come see him because he had been thinking about getting an order of protection.
 - ii. My heart sank when I walked in his apartment.
 - iii. His place was falling apart, literally.
 - iv. Chunks of ceiling plaster in his bedroom had fallen on his bed and bedroom floor because there was water damage from the apartment above him.
 - v. Leland spent way too much of his Social Security to cover the \$700+ rent.
 - vi. I asked him – have you told the landlord?
 1. It won't make a difference, pastor. He won't fix it.
 2. And if I make too big a fuss, he'll kick me out. And where could I go?
 3. He was right. Housing here is so expensive, and with so much demand, it's hard even to find a place.
 - vii. The church would help him here and there as we could.
 1. He was very proud to be self-sufficient, but he let me into his life, and let us help him
 2. On your behalf, I was able to support him, whether I was visiting him at the hospital, or talking with him and a police officer about that protective order, or just sitting there in my office, talking about life.
 - viii. Leland blessed me with his big heart, stubborn streak, down-to-earth wisdom, humor, compassion.
 1. He always would ask how mom was. He even bought her a present which he wanted me to take to her when I visited her in Mexico.

- ix. I learned a lot from him, because he trusted me, and he shared his life with me.
 - 1. I learned about the challenges of people living on the edge of survival, because of substance use disorder or lack of housing options or having a criminal record;
 - 2. I learned about his ever-present hope that things will turn around, that God hears our prayers, that the community will be there for you (and he himself was there for his neighbors in need too);
- x. I valued his trust in me; I valued that he saw me as his neighbor.
- d. You give me the great privilege of being a listening ear to neighbors like Leland who come regularly, or neighbors who are traveling through.
 - i. You yourselves have that very opportunity when you volunteer at Hot Meals, at Love Chapel, at Reading Buddies,
 - ii. or you teach a Sunday School class to our children, or you cook for our Youth Group, or you participate in a Bible Study,
 - iii. or support an Afghan immigrant family, or bring a meal to a church member recovering from surgery.
 - iv. You have the opportunity to hear different voices (and add your voice too).
 - v. Because, frankly, in this current cultural climate which is invested in isolating us one from another and preventing us from connecting, it is an act of resistance to seek to be in community with each other, with people from every element of our community, to listen to each other.
- e. In the Presbyterian Church one of the things that we have started to do at national level meetings is to ask this simple yet powerful question:
 - i. Are we listening to all the voices that need to be heard on this matter?
 - ii. Who are we not hearing from?
 - iii. The question challenges us to hear wisdom from a broader community.
- f. I think about Leland that way.
 - i. I think that when we are talking about housing or substance use disorder or safety for our seniors that his voice is an important one for me to listen to even long after he's gone.
 - ii. Just like when we heard the voices of our neighbors who are unhoused or were recently unhoused in our survey about affordable housing in the community.
 - iii. It's about listening to diverse voices which make up the community.
- 2. Today's gospel passage is a story about listening.
 - a. John the Baptist wanted to know if Jesus was the one that God had sent to save us.
 - i. When John's disciples ask that of Jesus, Jesus tells those disciples to go back to John and tell him what they see and hear
 - 1. Yes, they saw and heard about miracles, but I wonder if there was more
 - 2. I imagine the people who had just been healed ready to share their stories with John's disciples.
 - 3. Maybe we've been missing that part of the story.
 - 4. Go and tell John what you see in here, says Jesus. Because they are people whose stories would not have otherwise be heard
 - ii. Those in power in the society of their time didn't want to hear the stories of confessions that John the Baptist got to hear at the river Jordan,

1. And they also didn't want to hear the stories of the people of the margins Jesus hung out with, challenging the structure of society
 2. Those in power wanted to keep them "in their place," not bring them together.
 3. If those in power would hear about John the Baptist, they changed the narrative to say: oh, that guy? That guy is a weirdo. Don't listen to him
 4. And when they would hear about Jesus they would say: oh, that guy? He hangs out with all the sinners. He's a drunk. Don't listen to him.
 5. And yet what Jesus teaches is that by hearing each other's stories as we seek to do God's work, we build something that is different, something closer to the realm of God.
 6. And it takes all the stories, not just the stories which the powerful would prefer we would focus on.
 7. It's all the stories.
- b. If somebody asks your opinion about the state of affairs of our country or your perspective of faith as it relates to the challenges we all are facing, go and tell people what you see and hear.
- i. Go ahead and tell them stories that will defy their perception or bias.
 - ii. Tell them about the people on the margins that others don't care about listening to.
 - iii. Tell them about generous people of means who sacrifice to help others.
 - iv. Tell them about Leland loving his grandson and taking care of neighbors
 - v. Tell them about medical staff who offer compassionate care to all.
 - vi. Tell them about youth who raise money for our food bank
 - vii. Tell them about teachers who worry about and protect their students.
 - viii. Tell them about neighbors who stick their neck out for other neighbors.
 - ix. Tell them about God's Spirit leading us into places of ministry and blessing.
3. Go and tell others what you see and hear, where you see God at work, and how we can come alongside one another to nurture community in the name of God.

Sources:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/more-than-a-prophet/commentary-on-luke-718-35-2>