

All Saints A  
Matthew 5:1-12  
November 5, 2023

*“Remembering the Prophets”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

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Chances are, you’ve heard these words many times before. These are the beatitudes from Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. This time as I was reading them though, something different popped for me. The last verse: *“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

Today is All Saints Sunday and so, I think it’s fitting that we reflect on and remember some of the prophets that were before us, in the Congregational tradition and the United Church of Christ. In many ways, these brave individuals embodied the very spirit of the beatitudes. First,

though, I'd like to say a couple of things about what it means to be a prophet. Contrary to popular opinion, prophets are not fortune tellers and they don't see the future. Prophets are people who speak truth to power, in light of heaven's dream for global flourishing, on behalf of those who are marginalized and without voice or power. Prophets are often unpopular with those who hold power and maintain status quo, because status quo usually looks like injustice and injustice is contrary to heaven's dream for the world. Let's look now at some prophets in our own denomination's past.

When he was nine years old, a young Samuel Sewall moved from England to the colony of Massachusetts. Sewall went to college and was ordained as a Congregational minister. He was a printer, businessman, and judge. In 1700, Sewall published the tract *Stealing Joseph*, the first anti-slavery publication aimed at a general audience in the future United States. Writing in the gendered language of his day, Sewall states: "It is most certain that all Men, as they are the Sons of Adam, are Coheirs; and have equal Right unto Liberty, and all other outward Comforts of Life." In his tract, Sewall refuted many of the erroneous religious arguments employed in the justification of slavery. Though it would be another 83 years before slavery would be abolished in Massachusetts, Samuel Sewall raised a prophetic voice to power and to the status quo and helped to lay the foundation for future change.

In 1785, Lemuel Haynes was ordained into the ministry of the Congregational Church, becoming the first man of African descent ordained to ministry by a Protestant denomination. Haynes had fought in the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War and went on to serve three congregations during his lifetime. He gained an international reputation as a preacher, author, and abolitionist. Recalling the recent struggle for independence from English oppression, Haynes wrote: "Liberty is equally as precious to a black man, as it is to a white one, and bondage as equally as intolerable to the one as it is to the other." Throughout his life, Lemuel Haynes raised a prophetic voice to power and to the status quo and helped lay the foundation for future change.

Antoinette Brown was a bright child and at just 16 years of age, she began teaching school. When she'd saved enough money, she enrolled at Oberlin College—just recently opened to female students. She continued her education there in theological studies, but was denied a degree or license to preach. Nonetheless, she was ordained a Congregational minister in 1853, making her the first woman ordained by a protestant denomination in America. Brown stated that, “Women are needed in the pulpit as imperatively and for the same reason that they are needed in the world—because they are women. Women have become—or . . . they will become—indispensable to the religious evolution of the human race.” During her 96 years of life, Brown championed the cause of women in the religious, scientific, and social sphere. She was a prominent abolitionist and suffragist. Throughout her life, Antoinette Brown raised a prophetic voice to power and to the status quo and helped lay the foundation for future change.

In 1968, Benjamin Chavis was appointed Field Officer in the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. In 1971, he was sent to Wilmington, North Carolina to assist with desegregation in the public schools. He preached non-violence and met with students regularly at Gregory Congregational Church to discuss black history and to organize a boycott. In 1972, a grocery store was firebombed when Chavis and others were meeting at the church. Chavis and the others, known as the Wilmington Ten were arrested and charged with arson and conspiracy. They were all found guilty based on the eye-witness testimonies of two men who later recanted. After serving nearly 10 of his 34-year sentence, Chavis and the surviving members of the Ten were granted pardons of innocence. Since that time, Chavis has published the landmark national study: *Toxic Waste and Race in the United States of America*, served as Vice President of the National Council of Churches, Executive Director and CEO of the NAACP, National Director of the Million Man March Organizing Committee, co-founded the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network to fight the war on poverty and injustice, and has been a prolific writer and speaker for justice. Throughout his life, Benjamin Chavis has raised

a prophetic voice to power and to the status quo and helped lay the foundation for ongoing and future change.

In 1972, at Community Church, a UCC congregation in San Carlos, CA, William R. Johnson became the first openly gay person to be ordained in a protestant denomination. Since that time, Bill has founded the UCC Open and Affirming Coalition, traveled widely as a community organizer, founded the first parish-based LGBT ministry in the UCC, served as UCC Minister for HIV/AIDS Ministries and LGBT Concerns, aided in the establishment of the AIDS National Interfaith Network, provided leadership for the UCC on a range of issues from equal marriage to ending hate-related violence. He has created, authored, and co-authored numerous resources, curricula, and books, served as Vice President for Member Relations with the UCC Council for Health and Human Service Ministries, and been a tireless advocate for justice. Throughout his life, Bill Johnson has raised a prophetic voice to power and to the status quo and helped lay the foundation for ongoing and future change.

After more than two decades of service, in 1974, Yvonne V. Delk became the first woman of African descent to be ordained in the United Church of Christ. After her ordination, she was chosen to lead the UCC's Office of Church and Society. She worked as executive director of the Community Renewal Society, addressing poverty and homelessness in Chicago, served on the editorial board of Sojourners magazine, and founded the Center for African American Theological Studies. In her recently published book, Afro-Christian Convention: The Fifth Stream of the United Church of Christ, Delk casts new light on the 150 churches and 25,000 individuals that made up the Afro-Christian Convention which, along with the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church, united to become the United Church of Christ in 1957. Throughout her life, Yvonne Delk has raised a prophetic voice to power and to the status quo and helped lay the foundation for ongoing and future change.

These are just six examples of the prophetic work coming out of the Congregational tradition and the United Church of Christ, but there are so many more. Today, as we think about those saints and those prophets that were before us, we are challenged to ask ourselves: in what arenas of our community and national life might this church be called to raise its prophetic voice? And, to what issues might we be led, as individuals, to raise a prophetic voice? Prophets are people who speak truth to power, in light of heaven's dream for global flourishing, on behalf of those who are marginalized and without voice or power. Prophets don't require a particular skillset, degree, or credentials. Prophets just need to be willing to speak.

May it be so with us. Amen.