

Prophets Without Honor

75%.

That was the disapproval rating of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968, the year he died.

75%.

81%.

That's the percentage of Americans today who say Dr. King had a positive impact on American society.

Tomorrow we will celebrate the life and legacy of perhaps our nation's greatest prophet. Thousands, if not millions of people, across the country will engage in service projects in his honor. We will see clips of the "I Have a Dream" speech. There will be community gatherings and celebrations. It's an important holiday to remember such a great man.

But I can't help but wonder what has changed so much in the last 50 years that Dr. King's approval rating jumped 60%. Now, I know, on the one hand, that's a silly question – so much has changed. We live in a completely different time (and in some ways) a completely different world. Comparing Dr. King's approval rating in 1968 to his approval rating today is, in some ways, like comparing apples and oranges.

But I think there is something else going on here. Prophets are almost never accepted in their own time. The same was true for the prophets of the Old Testament. The same was true for Jesus.

In the passage we read, Jesus got off to a good start. He said he had come to liberate the oppressed, to bring sight to the blind, to free the captives, to bring good news to the poor. And apparently, the crowds liked what they heard. The Scripture says that "all spoke well of him." But only a few verses later, this same crowd that just moments ago were nodding their heads in approval of everything Jesus was saying was ready to throw him off a cliff.

What changed?

It's really quite simple. Jesus reminded the people that this good news was not only for them, but for everybody. He goes on to tell the story of a widow from Sidon, a foreigner, whom God provided for. You can almost hear the crowd gasp, "Jesus, what are you talking about? Now you're talking about God loving these foreigners. You're supposed to bring US good news. Who cares about THEM?"

Well, Jesus doesn't stop there. He not only talks about this widow from Sidon that Elijah helped, he also tells the crowd about Naaman, the Syrian. Now Naaman was a military

commander, and not only a military commander, but a Syrian commander. The very first people who conquered Israel were the Assyrians. This man was the hated enemy of Israel; he was the one that led the enemy into battle against Israel. He exemplified everything the people had struggled against for centuries. And Jesus reminds the people that God healed even this man, an enemy of Israel.

And it's a little easier to see why the crowd was ready to hurl Jesus off the cliff. You see, time and again, prophets get themselves in trouble because they challenge us to see the world like God does. And that means they challenge us to see all people as children of God. And that means that if all people are children of God, then all people are deserving of life, justice, and equality.

Prophets have this way of challenging us to place the responsibility for the flourishing of all people on society as a whole and not just on individuals pulling themselves up by their boot straps.

When Dr. King was killed, he was in Memphis to support a sanitation workers strike. Now my guess is that if Dr. King had come to Memphis to organize a canned food drive to support sanitation workers, his approval rating would have been a lot higher and he might not have gotten himself killed. But that's not what he did. He challenged the system that kept sanitation workers underpaid and, anytime, anyone challenges the system, then it can be scary for those who benefit from things being just like they are. It can even be scary for those who don't benefit but are scared of the change that might come.

That's why King's disapproval rating was so high.

That's why Jesus was nearly thrown off a cliff.

That's why King was shot.

That's why Jesus ultimately was crucified.

So what does this mean for us today?

It's tempting to just look at the realities of people like Dr. King, people like the prophets, people like Jesus being rejected in their own time as the short sightedness of the people then while claiming that we live in a more enlightened time. But I don't think humans in 2024 are morally superior to humans in 1968 or humans in 28AD. One of King's great quotes is, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." While I do think King is right, I also think that arc is very, very long...maybe even infinitely so.

What I mean is that while we may not have the same blindspots as people 50 years ago, I am certain that we also have our blind spots. Mary Page and I talk all the time about what it might

be that our kids and grandkids will realize that we were wrong about. I don't know what it will be but I know it will be something.

And that's why this is so hard. It's not that people in 1968 were worse people than we are. It's that we have the benefit of hindsight. We know that Dr. King was right about most things. But when you're living in the moment and a prophet is challenging the framework of society, it can be hard to accept, especially when society as a whole has not accepted those words. We don't like to hear words of critique, do we? I certainly don't. It's so easy to get defensive, or to react strongly against the challenge of the prophets. It's so easy to dismiss them, or reject them. To metaphorically push them off the cliff.

But maybe we can learn the lesson that is so hard to learn and even harder to accept. You and I are wrong about some things. Our society has not become perfectly just. So when we hear the modern day prophets challenging us in ways that make us uncomfortable, challenging us in the same way that Dr. King challenged the people of his day, the same way that Jesus challenged the people of his day, maybe we can try to respond not with defensiveness, not with anger, not with guilt, but rather with curiosity. Instead of being defensive, what if we asked the simple questions,

"What if we are wrong?"

"What if there is a better way?"

"What if there are people who are suffering because of injustice that we are complicit in?"

Not every voice of critique we hear will be proven right. There are plenty of demagogues of all ideological stripes. But the only way we will have a chance to know which voices are saying a word we need to hear, is if we can shift our focus from defensiveness to curiosity because defensiveness shuts down the conversation, curiosity engages and invites us to learn.

The temptation this weekend as we celebrate the legacy of MLK is to only talk about how much progress we've made. But if we do that, we're not really honoring him. My hope for me, my hope for us all is that we will be so compelled by the vision of people like Dr. King, so compelled by the vision of Jesus, so compelled by the vision of the prophets of our Scriptures, that we are willing to respond with curiosity even if we are uncomfortable, even if we are called out, even if we are challenged because we know that prophets are rarely accepted in their own time...even...and maybe especially when they are right.