

Friends of God and Prophets: Transformation for Justice

by Mary Ann Scofield

The phrase “Friends of God and Prophets” is drawn from the Hebrew Scripture, Wisdom 7:27, which reads:

“...in every generation, she [wisdom] passes into holy souls, and makes of them friends of God, and prophets.”

I want to explore how God’s action in our lives (1) creates friendship, (2) transforms us to the point where we see the world as God sees it, and (3) how this necessarily moves us, willingly or not, into a prophetic stance with the poor and against the unjust structures of our world. In that context, we can look together at how our training programs encourage or impede this three-fold transformation, and perhaps begin to answer the question: Where do we see the prophetic edge of spiritual direction?

Phase One: Becoming Friends of God

Who wouldn’t want to be a friend of God? It is the deepest desire of our hearts: to be fully known and accepted, loved as we are, without reservation; wholly held by God’s compassion, healed of our brokenness, set free to be our best selves. For most of us, it takes a very long time to absorb the reality of God’s love, but when it does take hold, and a human person experiences the radical unconditionality of God’s love, miracles do occur: joy surges up, affection and freedom emerge, whole new worlds open up.

In our spiritual direction training programs, I believe we have focused long and well on helping persons to become “friends of God.” We explore scripture to discover who this amazing God is, the One who delights in showing mercy, who desires that we have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). With our interns, we study psychology, human growth and development, to understand, yes, that we are wonderfully made (Psalm 139) but also that we are fragile and easily hurt, slow to forgive and to heal or be healed. We examine our theologies, our approaches to making sense of our lives, the elements that shape our spirituality. We teach others how to listen contemplatively, how to identify movements of God, resistance to grace, the tending of the Holy.

We are privileged to see people literally becoming “friends of God.” This is no small treasure shared with us! If you are like me, you have many moments during or after a spiritual direction session when you are in awe, and deeply humbled, by the action of God in the lives of your interns or directees.

So, I think that our training programs, our collaborations and regional support structures, our Spiritual Directors International symposia and conferences and Presence magazine, have done tremendous good. However, I invite us to examine whether our training programs stop at this level; namely, helping individuals to feel good about themselves—a sort of therapy with spiritual trappings—that does not go any further.

Phase Two: Being Transformed

The second phase is what I call being transformed or beginning to see life from God's perspective. Friendships change us; intimate relationships all the more so. It should not surprise us that becoming a friend of God has consequences. As God's joy fills my heart, I naturally share that "enthusiasm" (*en-theo*) with the people around me. We can no longer stay as we were, in our own comfort zones, cherishing the graces received. As God makes it clear that God wants to be the center of our lives, we have to toss out the old idols that have until now held that space captive, and reevaluate everything in the light of this one absorbing priority. This transformation can be quite sudden and radical—the response to an in-breaking of grace as seen, for example, Mother Teresa or St. Francis. More likely, it will be a slower dawning of what it means to be a friend of God: over time, values change; relationships are affected; lifestyles shift to align us more with our experience of God.

In our training centers, where we are learning together how to discern God's action in our human experience, we need to ask: What God are we looking for? What God are we training others to pay attention to? Is it the God of the politically powerful, dividing the world neatly into good and evil and wreaking vengeance on one's enemies? Or is it the God of the prophets, where we see Hosea describing a God as helpless as a spurned Lover, who must go to extraordinary lengths to woo us back into the divine embrace? The God of Isaiah, who demands justice for the oppressed, and fair wages for the laborer? The God of Jesus, who warns us not to pattern our lives on the religious professionals who pay tithes and accept places of honor in society, all the while trampling the rights of the poor?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, prophecy is distinctive but complex. Prophets were women and men, cultic priests and their opponents, in professional religious roles and in secular occupations, within the king's circle and critical of it. Genuine prophets saw the reality of their day from God's perspective and communicated that perspective to the people, whether it was a message of judgment or of consolation. In the New Testament, Jesus is depicted as referring to himself as a prophet (Mark 6:4). Like Elijah, Jesus heals and provides food miraculously. Like Amos and Jeremiah, he performs symbolic acts of judgment (Mark 11:15) and castigates the religious establishment of his day (Mark 12, Matt 23). The communities established in his name include prophets as communal authorities (1 Cor 12:28, Acts 13:1), as leaders of prayer (1 Cor 14:39), and as linked with the presence of the Spirit and the need for discernment (1 Thess 5:19-22).

Throughout all of Scripture, the true prophet sides with the poor. The false prophet, on the other hand, bolsters the comfort and security of the powerful. The true prophet points out the divine presence and power, always in the context of community, and with a view toward judgment that moves the people toward justice. The false prophet engenders an insular sense of security and inner peace in individuals that does not lead to action.

The links with spiritual direction are clear. Both prophet and spiritual director stand in a position of recognizing and mediating God's perspective, proclaiming God's ways. Both prophet and director stand in (sometimes critical) service of the larger community even while addressing individuals; social responsibility is the prerequisite stance. Both prophet and spiritual director attend to the divine valuation of actions and attitudes, and their consequences for choosing life or death in the eyes of God.

Phase Three: The Social Consequences of Conversion

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the social consequences of conversion the “cost of discipleship.” Authentic grace never comes cheap. Conversion, that movement beyond being a friend of God to becoming a prophet of God, inevitably sets us apart from the way most people see and live and think and feel. It made St Francis a laughingstock in his town. It landed John of the Cross in prison in his own community. It cost Gandhi his life. It pushed Dorothy Day to actions on behalf of justice that were incomprehensible to most of her contemporaries. True conversion always thrusts us into community, and conversion requires contemplation. Without community, the prophet slips into arrogance; without contemplation, the prophet cannot move beyond anger at the world’s injustices. If my words must speak for the powerless, then only God can energize me with both passion and compassion for the long haul.

How do we train for social consciousness? Are we teaching people to tend individual broken hearts without teaching them to listen to the cries of humanity? Are we teaching compassion for those who need healing, without watching for the divine passion that yearns to change the unjust structures that oppress the poor? I would suggest that we examine our training programs in this light and ask ourselves these questions:

Do our theologies embrace the prophetic edge, or shy away from what may be uncomfortable or challenging? Are we acting from the conviction that all of life is interconnected? Are we being prompted by God’s Spirit to participate in the vast shifts of consciousness that are shaping our world today: the human rights movement, the environmental movement, and others?

Who is it that we train? In general, our starting point has been mostly first world, mostly white, mostly middle- or upper-middle class. Don Bisson, a trainer whom many of you know, wonders whether we are guilty of creating “spiritual apartheid” by working with elites who have time, money and leisure for our training programs. How can we ensure that the circle widens?

Are we connecting our interns to voices that are not mainstream? How culturally diverse are we? How eager to embrace other cultures? Do we seek out the marginalized to learn from them? Surely the Lord hears the cry of the poor: Do we?

God is always at work, and nothing we do or fail to do will stop this divine energy. Our task is to pay attention and to nurture the in-breaking of the prophetic among us. This we do by sustained contemplative prayer and by refusing to isolate ourselves from the poor. If we daily risk this contemplative engagement with God, leave our comfort zones and move outward toward the marginalized, we will remain attentive to the subversive values of God who identifies with the “least in our midst,” the strangers, the outcasts; the God who pulls down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. We will be watching for the movement from consolation-that-leaves-us-comfortable, to consolation-that-sets-us-afire-for-justice. We will be training directors to seek out the marginalized and listen for God’s prophetic word there. We will be bringing spiritual direction to settings where it has not yet been. We will be moving beyond individualized spirituality toward the deeply spiritual work of community and structural change.

We will, in short, become not only friends of God but also prophets.

Excerpted from "Sacred is the Call", Suzanne M. Buckley, ed., The Crossroad Publishing Company 2005. Do not post or reprint without prior permission of Mercy Center Burlingame.