

Prophetic Voices – based on Mark 6:1-13
Aspen Community UMC
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How quickly the tide can turn.

Last week in our gospel reading Jesus was in the midst of well-wishers.

People saw Jesus as a healer and a teacher.

They wanted to receive his gift of healing.

They wanted to hear his words.

The major visionaries of world religions more often than not received a lot of resistance.

Remember the murmurings of the people during the time Moses was their leader?

Muhammad was often branded a charlatan and hunted down by his fellow tribesmen.

People did not want to listen to Confucius.

Lao Tzu saw himself as a social outcast.

Even though they were glorified by later traditions –
they were often ridiculed, even abused, as they lived their lives.

The people we call visionaries, prophets, teachers, reformers
observe the world and take hold of something that needs attention -
wrongs that need to be addressed – and truths that need to be expressed.

They are able to articulate and inspire people to follow.

That is what I want to talk about today -
people who have had their own prophetic voice – and used them well.



I can only talk about one of them in the time this morning.

So - I have had to choose.

Since it is the weekend that we celebrate our nation's birthday

I have some nice one's to choose from.

I want to tell you about a poet and songwriter.

Surely if there have been disciples of Jesus – she was one.

When we read scripture – we try to put it in the context
of the time and circumstances when it was written.

With songs - even those that we hold dear as Americans –
we seldom know much about the passions of the composer.

We clergy are often hesitant to mix patriotism with our Christianity.
But our Worship Chair encouraged me to take a closer at this song.

Thank goodness for lay people.

Jesus and the birth of Christianity came long before America.

We know that God knows no geographical boundaries.

But – certainly we consider our faith when we observe history and culture
and the call to action when there is oppression and the need is there.

Jesus would have wanted a nation and a people to be free of domination.

But – even then he would ask us to look deeper – at why it is not that way everywhere.

That is why I take the opportunity of this holiday – and one of its songs

as a way to celebrate not only the holiday

but the message of a writer -

one of the prophetic voices that ushered this nation

through some of its own growing pains.

This may seem more like a history lesson than a sermon –

and that may be good.



Let me tell you about Julia Ward Howe and her song – her hymn.

Julie Ward was born in 1819 in New York City into a strict Episcopalian Calvinist family.

Both of her parents died when she was young -

and she grew up in the home of an uncle

where conversations about religion and social issues were always going on.

When she was 21 - she married the Samuel Gridley Howe.

They were among a group of well educated people

who lived in the decades before the American Civil War.

Historians often refer to this generation of people as the Transcendentalists.

This – let's call it a generation wanted to create a unique body of literature that was American.

They went about creating literature, philosophy, poetry that were clearly American.

They also were a generation of people struggling to define spirituality and religion in a way that took into account new understandings.

The Enlightenment brought new rational conclusions about the natural world. Scholars had begun to look at the Bible through new eyes and methods of analysis - even to look at the scriptures of non-western cultures.

There must be truth in these scriptures too.

Many of these people became involved in social reform movements, especially anti-slavery and women's rights.

Julia became a Unitarian Christian.

She expressed belief in a personal - loving God who cared about humanity. She believed in a Christ who had taught a way of acting - a pattern of behavior - that humans should follow.

She did not see her own belief as the only route to salvation.

She had come to believe that religion was a matter of "deed - not creed."

Samuel and Julia attended the church where Theodore Parker was minister.

They tell that he often wrote his sermons with a handgun on his desk - ready - if necessary to defend the lives of the runaway slaves who were staying that night in his cellar on their way to Canada and freedom.

That would have been a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Samuel admired Julia's ideas - her quick mind - her wit - her active commitment to causes he also shared.

But he also believed that married women should not have a life outside the home.

Samuel was the director of the Perkins Institute for the Blind - and the family with six children lived on campus in a small house.

Julia lived in isolation for many years with little contact with the wider community.

She wrote poetry - but it became harder for her to maintain her isolation.

It was not a good marriage, sometimes it was violent.

She chose to remain married to him because she admired him - so they say - and because he threatened to keep her from her children if she divorced him.

Instead of divorce - she studied philosophy and learned several languages.

She devoted herself to her own education and the education of their children.
Then - she took two of the children to Rome and left Samuel behind in Boston.

Then Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850.
What this meant was that U.S. citizens even in states that banned slavery –
were legally responsible to return fugitive slaves to their owners in the South.
This law made even those in Northern states complicit with slavery.
It pushed many who had opposed slavery into more radical positions.

Around this time John Brown led an abortive effort at Harper's Ferry
to capture arms stored there and give them to Virginia slaves.
But that did not unfold as planned - and John Brown was defeated and killed.

Another issues also caught their attention
and that was the sanitary conditions of the prisoner of war camps.
More men were dying from disease caused by poor sanitary conditions
even their own army camps than died in battle.
Samuel and Julia became involved
in something called the U.S. Sanitary Commission.
Their efforts were successful in cutting the number of deaths in the later years of the war.

And as a result of this work -
the Howes were invited in 1862 to Washington by President Lincoln.
While there they visited a Union Army camp in Virginia.
They heard the men singing a song which had been sung by both North and South -
one in admiration of John Brown – and one in celebration of his death.
Someone who knew of Julia's published poems -
urged her to write a new song to replace "John Brown's Body.

So, this is how she described it later:
"I replied that I had often wished to do so...
and in spite of the excitement of the day I went to bed and slept as usual,
but awoke the next morning in the gray of the early dawn,
and to my astonishment found that the wished-for lines were arranging themselves in my brain.
I lay quite still until the last verse had completed itself in my thoughts,
then hastily arose, saying to myself, I shall lose this if I don't write it down immediately.

I searched for an old sheet of paper and an old stub of a pen which I had had the night before,
and began to scrawl the lines almost without looking,

as I learned to do by often scratching down verses
in the darkened room when my little children were sleeping.
Having completed this, I lay down again and fell asleep,
but not before feeling that something of importance had happened to me.”

The poem was published in February 1862 in the *Atlantic Monthly*.
Before long it was put to the tune that had been used for “John Brown’s Body.”
It became the best known Civil War song of the North.

She urged people to implement - in this life and this world - a principle found in scripture.

“As he died to make men holy – let us die to make men free.”

We also hear other Old and New Testament images
as she weaves her words into a song of freedom.

Before long - her early poems – her social commitments were forgotten.

She was paid \$5 by the editor of *Atlantic Monthly* for the poem.

And the song is still a loved by many
and sometimes - even still in the South - maligned.

But – she was a prophetic voice.

The issue she addressed was slavery -
and it still exists in parts of the world.

So – as far as a call to action –
she would surely invite us to carry it forward in other ways in other places.

May it inspire us to live prophetic lives
and be prophetic voices in our time.

The Battle Hymn of the Republic