

The Fate of the Prophets

Sermon preached by Rev. Robert Balint

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I would like to share with you a story. The story of the foolish minister. Once upon a time, there was an open minded, talented young man. His name was Ferenc. Son of a proud nation with a remarkable history. But by the time he grew up the great war split his country in several parts. Suddenly his family, as another million people realized that they were living in foreign countries. The rulers become ruled. The ruled become the rulers. It was time for revenge. It was time to hit back... The nation was shocked. Some of them ran to the diminished motherland, some of them remained crying... there was no hope, just in their dreams.

But then some young people, eleven of them gathered. Ferenc, the hero of our story was one of them, their leader. Something must be done. What are our values, what are our strengths. Let`s engage them to track our future. Their meetings at the dormitory of the Theological seminar in Kolozsvar brought its fruit. They put together a program, which aimed at an inner renewal of the nation along its most valuable traditions, and since most of his people lived in villages, to lift the level of life and culture in villages.

After finishing the Theological seminar a great opportunity was opened for him. To travel and study all around the world. This was not only an academic journey, but also a spiritual one, and a time to learn as much as possible about the possibilities of a greater life for its people back in Transylvania. In England he enjoyed the great structure of the academical institutions, that did not confine the students, but helped to develop their own vision. But the consequences of industrialization, made him question: Is all this wealth and richness worth the pain and suffering of so many people? During his travels to West Europe, Ferenc learned about the cooperative movement that became the quintessence of his future plans. In the United States where he was studying in Berkeley, at the Unitarian Theological Institute, he got acquainted with the co-op idea and the civil movements proliferating in that time. The issue of human rights and peace were an actual problem in America, so his conviction in the worth and dignity of all human beings, no matter what race, gender, religion, class or nation they are part of was reinforced and broadened. It was here where he met the love of his life, his future wife: Christine.

In the last year of his journey he visited the land of earthquakes, Japan, China, the Giant, India the land of Gandhi and Tagore. He spent lots of time with this latter. For Francis, Tagore was not only a master of poetry, but also an inspirer in spiritual and social questions. Even meeting with Gandhi, he remained an adherent of Tagore`s teaching and example.

After five years of traveling Francis finally arrived home in Transylvania. A land of many beauties, and many sufferings. A land with a remarkable spiritual history, the home of religious freedom and consciousness in the past, and a land of oppression in his time, for his people.

He started with the idea of finding new solutions for the Transylvanian situation. He arrived home as a convinced adherent of peace, with the idea of cooperative agricultural movement, and convinced by the importance of education and community development. But also with a strong worldview that was the guiding line of his life and which he had formulated in his creed:

I believe that this world is not a chain of casual things. I believe that everything has its own aim.

I believe that the world's nature, predestination, fate, decision, unchangeable will is to form persons who – with great trust – can feel and know themselves integrated parts of the whole world and act as such.

I believe that the world purpose keeps working through many small aims, through the fulfillment of human will, that each generation, each individual has the task of forging one of the chain-links.

I believe that if I can fulfill my little purpose in this short life of mine, I achieve something valuable in itself and not even death can diminish its meaning.

I believe in human dignity; and in case it identifies itself with the world purpose, I believe in the freedom of will.

I believe that the will of my real self is the will that achieves expression in the world purpose, and if I follow the world purpose, I only follow my own will.

And I believe in God: this world is beautiful, great, wonderful, with happy fate, it is amazing and mysterious; and when I am filled with it, overwhelmed with its infinity, its intimacy raises me, its joy makes me rejoice – then what springs forth for me is: God.

Do not ask what this word really means for me.

It means what wailing means for those in pain, what oh! means for those in surprise, what laughter means for the happy; it expresses everything because it says nothing. I do not argue, I do not state, I do not prove; I am not self consistent, I give no reasons: I only sigh and cry and rejoice and I am enthusiastic: God.

Religion gives the aim of my life; science helps me reach it; arts give me the opportunity to take pleasure in it. And it is this life of mine – becoming perfect through all these – where I expect God to reveal Himself. (My Own Creed by Balázs Ferenc)

He settled down in a small, poor, remote village in Mészkö, and he started the greatest journey of his life. He engaged himself with his wife Chrisne in empowering the congregation with a new vision, organizing activities that involved every member, he tried to reform the farming habits, convincing the farmers of the benefits of collaboration, to reconcile the different nations living in his village, saving the 600 years old church building, the school, meanwhile also trying to spread his ideas in a larger community, he travelled, publicized, he was tireless. He dedicated his time, his energy, his love, his faith, his whole life to this cause, to this vision: saving the Transylvanian village, culture, heritage sometimes neglecting his personal and familiar needs, his health.

People just called him the foolish minister. I don't know why? Maybe because they thought it inappropriate for a person who have travelled all around the world to hide oneself under the cloak of poverty. Maybe because after so many years of studying, with all the knowledge earned only a fool would waste his time to struggle with the mud and poorness of a village, with the narrow-mindedness of the people living there. Only a fool would dedicate his life to a vision, which has an almost unreachable purpose. But maybe they called him a fool because he trusted them, even after being let

down so many times. He still believed in their human dignity, and in their capacity to realize this dignity. People might have liked this. But the responsibility that comes with this was not so tempting. For once one has understood the sacredness of life, the dignity of every human being, one also had realized the responsibilities of life. Well,- people might have thought - do we really need this? It is better this way... our way. Why is our fate bothering him so much? Why does not he look after his work. Saying nice words, pathetic prayers from the pulpit. Why does he not accept us as we are?

Is the story familiar? It pretty much resembles the fate of the misunderstood prophets of human history. Who is a prophet? According to the Bible the prophet is the messenger of God, the living consciousness of the people. They always remind people of their faults. Thus their presence is always very uncomfortable. It is no miracle that some prophets of the Old Testament are reluctant to obey God's will. Moses tries to avoid the fate of prophets, referring to his disability to speak. Jeremiah complains that he is too young, and no one would listen to him. Jonah just simply tries to run away and hide from his fate. He is not a fool, to suffer for others. But, there is no way to hide from God, or there is no way to refuse being the messenger of God. And finally all of them after fighting their fear abide the calling of God. Of course there are other kinds of prophets, too, like Isaiah, who responds to the calling of God, with: "*Here am I, send me*". And they follow the path of God.

To tell the truth, I do not believe that only a godly constraint can make someone become a prophet. Though I do not deny this I think prophets, man or woman with a strong vision of a mission struggling for the sake of their people, of humanity, can have many forms of inspiration: the revelation of God, but also the hardships of human life. I also think that every strong faith is an outcome of an inner struggle. Prophecy emerges from a strong inner conviction to bring peace and counselling to the world.

I do not believe either that the only purpose of the prophets is to point out the weaknesses people have. That would be too easy. Criticize, and then leave alone. Anyone can do that. The real task of a prophet is to raise its people, to make them aware of their values. To give them back their dignity. Not only to the poor, but also to the rich, not only to the oppressed, but also to the oppressors. Their task is to give the oppressed faith in their human dignity, and give the oppressors faith in their human responsibility. This is the only way the world can be moved in a better direction. And this is the real duty of a prophet.

In my vision, Francis Balazs was one of these prophets. A prophet with a disruptive vision and attitude. A prophet who had the courage to question the status quo of the old traditions, of the social structure, the message of his church, but also the idea that people of different nations or different class cannot live and work together. Even though his thoughts were prophetic, his ways were simple ones: educate the people, show them a new possibility. Some call him a social reformer, but I prefer prophet, for his work was spiritual one, too.

I would like to emphasize some aspects of his story.

1. He deconstructed the traditional role of the minister. First of all he refused to be the preacher of the few, the wealthy, but had a message to everyone. His theology was for everybody. So were his plans, they were inclusive for man and woman, young and old, poor and wealthy, Hungarian and Romanians.

2. He also deconstructed the traditional way of being a minister. Instead of using the so called divine authority, he chose to educate from the pulpit, and in life. He tried to understand people, their life, their needs, and encourage them to find their own vision. He tried to convince people with reason.

3. He realized that the traditions of the past are useless if you don't fill them with meaning. When he was rebelling against the church, he was not rebelling against the apostolic, prophetic heritage, but against the way it was lived, or actually not lived.

4. He also was a convinced adherent of the thought that a better level of life can be achieved only through cooperation, if people would understand that they are all part of an interdependent web of life, and if they would act according to it.

5. Even though, as you have heard from his creed, he was an advocate of the idea that small steps can significantly contribute to a desired change in the world, Francis was rushing with huge steps. His spirit was too restless, the problems, the poorness of his village and land were so pressing that he felt he had to do the work of six persons. After eight years of hard /spiritual, intellectual and physical work, after being misunderstood, and I think I can say, even betrayed by indifference and viciousness of the people he wanted to help and lift, tired in body and maybe in soul, too he died of tuberculosis. He was 36 six years old. He literally consumed his life for the sake of others. His body was too weak for the great spirit he had.

His dreams seemed to fade away. The economical, agricultural projects he was engaged in the village mostly failed. He died young, leaving behind a 4 year old girl, Enikő, and a wife who followed him from America, Christine. Was his struggle in vain?

He wrote „*I want everyone to know that I did not die here. My villages's moods and problems did not drown me... I hid myself under the clod. Let me be seen thus: I will sprout in these field in the spring. There will be blossoms here which will bear good fruit.*”

I have to tell you, that even though he failed in most of his projects in the village, his ideas were carried out in some of the surrounding Unitarian villages. These were more homogeneous communities with more economical power. The idea of the Folk High School he established to educate the young farmers got roots and even today is alive in Transylvania and Hungary. The youth movement that he was part of is not only alive but is one of the most important institutions of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church. The jewelry box seven centuries old church he saved is still there. The small congregation is alive and is very proud of the spiritual heritage that was left behind, and tries to organize its life according to Ferenc's spirit, to spread his ideas.

What have I learned from Balázs Ferenc?

1. That prophets are not heroes with a sudden solution, but dedicated persons who have to work and sacrifice a lot. That real change can only be brought after a long, tiring work. That you may face a lots of ignorance, narrow mindedness. It is a tough work. Sometimes your biggest enemies will be those you want to help.
2. From his fault I also learned that you just cannot rush. Take your time, know the people, their need, do not hurry, they might not have the same power and same spirit you have. Help them understand the need for change. Hold their hands till they can walk alone.
3. If not, you will remain alone. Or you will feel that you are alone. After all this is the fate of prophets. Is it really? Well, let me read this *”It is only now that I understand that everybody loved me, almost everybody. But the person who struggles does not pay attention to the sun, but always watches out for the storm.”* He did not let them to love him. He did not have time in his struggle to be loved.

Who is a prophet? The messenger of God? Yes, but everybody with a vision of a mission for a better life in the world can be. Maybe you are a prophet. Did you ever had a vision for a better

life? Did you ever believed that it is your responsibility to contribute to the transformation of this Earth into a better place? Did you ever care about your fellows? Did you ever sacrifice anything for the sake of others? If yes, you understand the meaning of Ferenc's words: „*My destiny is this: to be understood by a few. In the lives of some, to be leaven. For many others, to be a goad. I carry however, the seed of the future and not the present's broken and bloody body.*” But you also understand that this struggle and sacrifice is never in vain.

Amen

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