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Tom Lindner

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A PROPHETIC REMINDER AMID DIVISION

Tom Lindner

Being on sabbatical, have a break from normal tasks as a parish pastor, is a good thing. Having had that opportunity at St. John's in the 2017 spring semester, I've also felt relieved in that I haven't had to preach during months in which political tensions have escalated and, thus, the need for a homiletic response ever more pronounced. I've thought of Father John Dear, a Jesuit at the time, who visited my campus parish in the days after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and asked me in a moment of casual conversation, "So, what have you been preaching about the war, Tom?" Not much, I confessed. I've also remembered another Jesuit who I encountered shortly after the first Iraq War and who was adamant in his opposition and the need for such matters to be addressed in Lord's Day preaching. I didn't disagree, but I also wasn't hearing such preaching, or offering it myself. The following essay considers some of the necessity and challenge of prophetic preaching and witness.

When Father Daniel Berrigan died on April 30, 2016, news of his passing was reported on the front page of the *New York Times*, as well as the major network newscasts. His funeral a few days later was attended by more than 800 people. When he visited the seminary I was attending in the early 90s for a lunchtime discussion, there

were only a dozen of us who chose to deviate from the usual mid-day chatter and routine to engage in conversation with someone who, while clearly controversial, was also somewhat of a legend. And here he'd come to speak and be with us.

Daniel Berrigan wasn't the kind of priest most of us aspired to be, if that meant spending time in prison; alienating vast swaths of the population with seemingly incendiary views; truly embracing the rigors of poverty – it is said that he wore the same thread-bare clothes and owned practically nothing; and always appearing to be out of the mainstream, going against the flow, eager to upset the apple-carts of government, Church and society in general. That might explain why so few of my peers declined that day's opportunity. They may not have known much about Fr. Berrigan, but they knew he was "out there" and that's not where they wanted to be.

I'm pretty sure I didn't want to be there either, and while I didn't know all that much about Daniel Berrigan – let's remember the heyday of his most significant public presence had come 30 years earlier – I also was reluctant to simply ignore him as a wacko or a troublemaker, both labels he'd probably have eagerly accepted. He'd suggest that people said the same thing about Jesus in his day; that preaching the gospel, by its very nature, goes hand-in-hand with making trouble, discomfiting the comfortable, and seeking comfort – and justice – for the rest.

I don't remember what he said that day, but I suspect he read a poem or two; that he talked about the evils of war, including the one we were engaged in at the time; that he called attention to disparities of wealth that have only been exacerbated in the intervening decades; that he decried the Church – and those of us sitting around him – for our silence and complicity to the injustices of our society. I say those are things he probably addressed because they were common themes throughout his life.

Daniel Berrigan is most famous – or infamous – for his adherence to pacifism and opposition to the Vietnam War. The same spring that Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were assassinated, he was one of eight who went into a draft board office, removed hundreds of records, carried them to the parking lot and set them on fire. It was not a call to arms, but a plea for peace. And he endured the consequences of time in prison, for that action and numerous other marches, sit-ins and protest actions. His persistent gentleness was as maddening to some of his opponents as the actions themselves.

Not only his admirers regarded Berrigan as a prophet, since that designation doesn't necessarily coincide with adulation. To say he was challenging is a gross understatement, and his was a priesthood that ran contrary to most of our experiences of priests, who they are and what they do. He was never a pastor; he didn't need to accede to various expectations, there was no need to worry about offending potential contributors or modifying his message to placate parishioners of various political persuasions. He'd have argued that no preacher, pastor or Christian should. Nor would a prophet.

I certainly didn't hear Daniel Berrigan that day and conclude he would be my model as a priest. That said, his witness remains an inspiration and challenge. We need people who are hard to take, who are unsettling and controversial, who confront us with views – truths? – that we'd just as soon reject or at least avoid. I think our Church is a little less dynamic and, I'd argue, less faithful to the hard truths of the gospel, without the likes of Daniel Berrigan. The rest of us need those who will say and do what we – for all of our complicated reasoning, real or perceived – can't or won't.