

August 14, 2020

Frederick Douglass, Prophet

Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.

— Fredrick Douglass

On August 11, 1841, Frederick Douglass, a fugitive slave, addressed a white audience for the first time when he spoke to a gathering of abolitionists on Nantucket. Later, Douglass would become a licensed preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New Bedford, Mass., and had many roles in the denomination. Douglass gave many incredible speeches in the States, Ireland and Britain. He advised presidents. He believed firmly in the equality of all people.

He also embodied a rather radical Christian faith. Douglass was a prophet crying in the wilderness of Christian slaveholding America. He aspired to speak to America as biblical prophets once spoke to their people: with words of warning and rebuke, grace and hope. Douglass quoted the prophet Isaiah at length.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has written that ancient Hebrew prophets “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture.” They offer “an alternative perception of reality,” one that allows people to “see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and [God’s] will for justice.” That’s what Fredrick Douglass did. He offered a glimpse of a new reality. And he offered critique of the one he experienced. Douglass once said, “Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference.”

Our challenge as a faith community is to keep working to close that gap!

Blessings!

Paula