

The Prophet Among Us

A Sermon for the Commemoration of the Rev. Canon Dr. Nelson W. Pinder

When I learned that Nelson had passed at the age of eighty-nine, I found myself thinking back to those days when he would fill in for me at St. Gabriel's in Titusville. You don't forget a man like that. You don't forget someone who carries the weight of a calling with such grace and determination. Nelson wasn't just my colleague; he was a living embodiment of what it means to say "yes" to God in the midst of a world that was saying "no" to him at every turn. And he was also someone who could make you laugh.

I remember hearing a story about right before the offering one Sunday—and this is so perfectly Nelson—he looked at the congregation with that twinkle in his eye and said, "Now I don't wanna hear any NOISE in the collection plate! Just the sound of large bills being folded!" That was Nelson: prophetic and playful at once, calling people to generous faith with humor and heart. He understood something that many of us forget—that the work of justice and reconciliation doesn't have to be grim. It can be done with joy. It can be done with a smile. It can invite people in rather than shame them into submission.

This morning, we gather not just to commemorate a life—though Nelson's life certainly deserves that honor. We gather to remember a prophet. In the most biblical sense of the word. Because a prophet is not someone who predicts the future; a prophet is someone who speaks truth to power, who stands with the oppressed, and who refuses to be silenced by the comfortable lie that things are as they should be. And Nelson Pinder was a prophet in Orlando, Florida, during one of the most turbulent and necessary seasons of our nation's history.

"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

That's the call, isn't it? When the prophet Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up, when he understood the holiness and the glory and the terrible weight of what God was calling him to do, he didn't hesitate. He didn't negotiate. He didn't ask for committee approval or safe passage or a guarantee that he wouldn't face opposition. He simply said, "Here am I; send me." And I believe that's exactly what Nelson said when he arrived at the Orlando airport in 1959, still bearing the marks of segregation—denied a cab because of his skin, denied a cup of coffee while he waited. In that moment of humiliation, he could have despaired. He could have fled back to wherever he'd come from. But instead, he heard the voice of God saying, "Go back." And he said yes to a calling that would cost him everything but also give him everything.

Think about the courage that took. Think about a young priest, ordained to proclaim the Gospel, finding himself in a city that was one of the most segregated places in America. The powers that were comfortable in their segregation didn't want to hear about a God who loved all people. They didn't want to hear about the dignity of every human being made in God's image. And Nelson stood up anyway. He became Orlando's "street priest" during the lunch counter sit-ins, mentoring young people in the discipline of non-violent resistance. Many historians believe his work with young people single-handedly prevented the riots that tore apart so many American cities. He did that by showing up, by being present, by incarnating the Gospel in the streets.

"Though an army should encamp against me, yet my heart shall not be afraid; and though war should rise up against me, yet will I put my trust in him." (Psalm 27:3-4)

This is the psalm that speaks to Nelson's life with stunning clarity. "Though an army should encamp against me." And indeed, an army of opposition did encamp against him. Racial hatred. Threats of violence. Someone bombed his car. People told him he was crazy. White folks and Black folks alike questioned his methods, his sanity, his safety. And yet his heart did not fear, because his trust was not in safety or in popularity or in being liked by the powerful. His trust was in the God who keeps us safe in the shelter of his dwelling, who sets us high upon a rock.

That's what prophetic faith looks like. It doesn't promise you won't be opposed. It promises that opposition cannot ultimately defeat you, because your allegiance is to something—to someone—far greater than the principalities and powers that rage against you.

"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25:35-36)

Jesus' great litmus test for discipleship is so simple that we keep missing it. It's not about doctrine or creedal precision. It's about whether you see the face of Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. It's about whether your faith moves you to action on behalf of those who have been pushed to the margins.

In 1969, Nelson was installed as a Canon at the Cathedral Church of St. Luke and assigned to the Awareness Center, an experimental ministry to serve the unhoused and their civil rights. He didn't just preach about the Gospel; he lived it. He went to where the suffering was. He advocated for the voiceless. He built institutions—the Awareness Center—to address the needs of those Christ called "the least of these." That's Matthew 25 in action. That's a faith that didn't just talk about the love of Jesus; it embodied it, incarnated it, made it real in the lives of the people who needed to know that they mattered.

And Nelson wasn't alone in that calling. He had Marian, his wife of what must have been decades, standing with him. They had children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren who inherited his vision for a beloved community where everyone knows they are deeply loved by God. He trained young people in the way of non-violence. He mentored clergy and lay leaders nationally through his work with the Union of Black Episcopalians and the National Commission on Social and Specialized Ministries. He understood something crucial: prophetic work doesn't end with one person. It multiplies through those you teach, guide, and inspire.

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

Paul reminds us that the Spirit gives different gifts to different people, but they're all given for the common good. And here's the thing about Nelson: he understood his gifts—his capacity to lead, to inspire young people, to speak prophetically, to show up where others feared to go—not as personal possessions but as gifts to be used for the common good. He was a gift to the Church. He was a gift to Orlando. He was a gift to the Diocese of Central Florida. And he's still a gift to us, because his example challenges us to ask: What gifts has God given to me? And am I using them for the common good, or am I holding them for myself?

In 2022, just before he died, Nelson reflected on his ministry in what had been one of the most segregated cities in America. He said, "I felt that God has prepared me for this mission." He acknowledged that people thought he was crazy—white folks and Black folks both. He knew he might be killed. But then he said something that captures the essence of his faith: "I'm not 33 yet. My boss was 33 when he died. I've got a little time yet left."

I have to tell you, when I read that, my heart broke open a little. Because that's not arrogance. That's faith. Nelson was saying: I've been given a little time left on this earth, and I'm going to use it as my Lord used his. I'm going to serve. I'm going to speak truth. I'm going to stand with the oppressed. I'm going to spend myself out for the kingdom of God. That's the faith of a prophet. That's the faith that transforms cities.

So what does it mean for us to commemorate Nelson today? I don't think it means we put him on a pedestal and admire him from a distance. I think it means we ask ourselves: What is the prophetic calling God is placing on our lives? What injustices are we being called to address? What work of healing and reconciliation are we being called to do? How are we supposed to be prophets in our own time, in our own communities, with the gifts God has given us?

The beloved community that Nelson gave his life for isn't finished yet. We're still building it. We're still called to repair the breach, to tell the truth in love, to proclaim the dream, to practice the way. And the Spirit is still giving us gifts for the common good. The question is: Will we, like Nelson, say, "Here am I; send me"? Will we let that ancient courage, that unshakeable faith, that prophetic witness live on through us?

Nelson Wardell Pinder lived until he was eighty-nine. He used every bit of that time in service to the Gospel and to his brothers and sisters. He didn't retreat when things got hard. He didn't compromise when pressured. He didn't give up when opposed. He stood. He spoke. He served. And he showed the world what it looks like when a priest of Jesus Christ says yes to God completely, without reservation, without condition.

May we, by God's grace, do the same.