

## **Patient prophecy in an elevator**

**By Bishop Paul V. Marshall**

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On one of last month's coldest days, my friend stepped into an elevator with a woman who was shivering. Bill gave her a sympathetic look. "I pity the people who have to work outdoors today," she said. "Yes, and those who have to live outdoors," he replied. Silence. To the seventh floor. As the doors opened she quipped, "They could get jobs if they wanted to." Then, she hurried out of the car.

I have field-tested this true story. At first hearing people respond as I initially did, somewhat disapproving.

Something else may have been going on. Bill's few concerned words about the homeless had clearly gotten under her skin. She had been thinking.

The beginning of compassion is dealing with ourselves, with our resistance to thinking and acting outside of what is comfortable to us. I think she began to do that thinking, and was doing so because of how little Bill said.

He gave her room to think. Her defensive response suggests she was doing so. I'm willing to accept the possibility that the next day she made a contribution to the Allentown Rescue Mission.

I don't know if Bill's remarks were inspired or "just" highly intuitive? The story, however, is a reminder that there is more than one way to be a prophet, one who speaks for God.

Ephesians 4 enjoins us to "speak the truth in love." Each of us is aware of when we were or were not motivated entirely by love when we spoke, and of times when one love seemed to require rejecting another love when speaking.

I think here, however, about "speaking the truth." How much is enough? Should Bill have preached her a sermon on social concerns, Jesus' absolute preference for the poor, or the overwhelming concern of both testaments for economic justice? Ought he carry tracts with him explaining Christian compassion?

Well, there are occasions when those tactics could be perfect, and I have some pictures of Africa I'd like to show you.

I would also like to show you some statistics about life in parts of Pennsylvania.

This year, the entire church is following Luke's gospel, where we deal repeatedly with Jesus' own critique of greed and exclusion. As a church, we could investigate the scriptures more thoroughly and more often.

We know the saying that if the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem appears to be a nail. Bill's story is a reminder that there is more than one tool in our kit as we witness, teach, or even preach.

Sometimes it is important to inform. Sometimes it is important to persuade. Sometimes it is important to invite people to think new thoughts. It takes gifts to do any of these, but as I write this I admire (and envy) those who do provoke thought with just a few words.

The "prophet" in the elevator was patient.

The patient prophet has to overcome the need for instant closure, decision, or results. Such patience is not to be mistaken for a lack of concern or urgency. It simply recognizes and respects the varying rates at which individuals grow.

My friend's witness reminds me that the Spirit has worked in many of our lives gradually and progressively, assisted by the patient words of others.

One other thing. What if Bill had chosen simply to nod in agreement with the lady's doubtlessly kind observation about the people working outside? Subtle, patient prophets teach us courage, too.

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