

Sermon Notes – January 28, 2018
“Oprah”
Brian Walton

I want to begin this morning’s sermon with a multiple-choice test such as you might find on a history exam. I am going to provide a quote and I would like you to name who said it. There are three potential answers: 1) the Hebrew prophet Isaiah; 2) Jesus, who many called the Christ or 3) the television personality Oprah Winfrey. Here are your five questions:

Live your life with an open heart through love – OW

Say to one another, “Take courage”- Is.

Allow abundance and blessing into your life – OW

Maintain hope for a brighter morning – OW

Whoever is not against us, is for us – JC

Perhaps we should not be surprised that Oprah sounds a lot like a Biblical prophet. She was raised to know and proclaim the Christian faith as taught by her Baptist grandmother. She was given the name of one of the women of the Bible, Orpah. As we read in this morning’s first lesson there was a Jewish woman called Naomi. She and her two sons moved to a foreign land where the boys met and married local women – Ruth and Orpah. Tragedy struck and the men died. Middle eastern custom required that woman cling to their husband’s family, and so Ruth and Orpah are bound to Naomi. Naomi wants to return to her native Israel and so she takes pity on her daughters-in-law and tells them that they are released from their commitment. Ruth becomes the focus of the story as she continues with Naomi. Orpah returns to her people. It is reported that Orpah Winfrey’s name was continually mispronounced in her family and by

the time she was seven the mispronunciation stuck and she became known as Oprah.

Oprah's childhood was lived between a dysfunctional mother, a committed grandmother and a stern father. One reporter wrote: "... because of her grandmother's values, (Oprah) had religion and God was instilled in her at a very young age ... during church (she) would recite poems and verses from the Bible ... the entire neighbourhood knew she had a gift and nicknamed (her) "The Little Speaker." Although it appears that she was raised amidst a more fundamentalist version of Christianity, her life experience has shaped her beliefs. In the following clip she sounds a lot like many United Church folks I know. <first clip of Oprah>

Despite her Christian claims, it would seem that Oprah has become a secular priestess, a spiritual leader, an almost-evangelist for a contemporary, religion-free, spirituality. When I reflect upon the ministry of Jesus and the influence of Oprah it is hard not to recognize some similarities, despite 2000 years of cultural difference. One of the best Biblical scholars of the 21st century was Marcus Borg. He conducted an in-depth study of the life of Jesus and concluded that he could say four things about Jesus with certainty: Jesus was a healer, a wisdom teacher, a social prophet and a movement founder. I see each of these characteristics reflected in Oprah Winfrey.

She has committed a substantial portion of her work to healing. In a book by Marcia Nelson entitled *The Gospel According to Oprah*, Nelson writes: "Oprah's influence is based in her gift for listening and her knowledge that self-disclosure ... offers a means of liberation. Oprah has sought to promote healing from sexual abuse, healing from a negative body image and healing from self-defeating thoughts. Her guests, her book

recommendations, and her on-line videos are designed to bolster fragile egos.

Oprah promotes wisdom. She encourages people to reflect on their life and to nurture their spirit. The New Age spiritualist Eckhart Tolle received special attention from her for his promotion of meditation and universal oneness. In her talk show she chose to listen to people's crisis and affirm their sources of strength, distinguishing her from the likes of Jerry Springer who made his money exploiting people's dysfunction.

Is Oprah a social prophet? This is an area for some debate. She challenges oppression, especially sexual exploitation, and promotes marginalized groups such as African Americans, oppressed women and the LGBTQ2 community. Her critics suggest that her advocacy is neo-liberal – that is, it focuses on self-advancement rather than on societal transformation. For a few moments at least, I was entranced by her prophetic message at the Golden Globe awards. A small excerpt is found in this video clip. [<video clip from golden globe>](#)

The Bible scholar Borg suggests that Jesus was a “movement founder”. There is little doubt that Oprah is a movement founder. In this age of communication Oprah's movement is massive and world-wide. Her television audience numbered 10 million and her magazine is sold to 2.7 million readers. In her book, Nelson writes:

Watching the Oprah show is something like attending a worship service. Go to this house of worship and sit down for an inspiring hour that will engage you and give you a lift. An hour-long show five days a week adds up to a lot more pulpit time ... than the average pastor enjoys.

Between her message and her medium there is little doubt that Oprah has founded a movement.

Inspired by her Golden Globe speech I thought she was a cultural icon worthy of consideration. Yet, Oprah is not without controversy. The web is rife with indignant Christians who view her secular spirituality as a sign of the anti-Christ. Other commentators view her with cynicism suggesting that she is simply a slick media personality who has used spirituality to advance her fortunes. Still others critique her for promoting the gospel of personal success through positive thinking without addressing the systemic factors that keep people impoverished or marginalized. One wonders how she reconciles her 3-billion-dollar fortune with her Biblical heritage and Jesus' suggestion that it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

As I struggled between cynicism over Oprah's empire and admiration for her powerful speech, I wondered if there was any Biblical wisdom to help me. As a result, I turned to this morning's little passage from the gospel of Mark and specifically Jesus' words: "Those who are not against us, are for us." The disciples seem to suggest that they have an exclusive view of the Jesus way. Someone else seemingly doing good – casting out demons – is criticized by his disciples who declare: "we tried to stop him because he was not following us!"

Jesus' response is immediate – "don't stop him. Whoever is not against us, is for us." He goes on to say that anyone who gives a cup of water to a thirsty person is about the work of God. Perhaps Oprah's secular spirituality and the Jesus way are on the same side when they give water to the thirsty, liberation to those bound by abuse, encouragement in the face of self-defeating thoughts, even cold hard cash to build schools

and fund charities. Perhaps the Islamic community hosting an event on peace, the secular environmentalist lobbying for more buses, the diehard entrepreneur who increases his employee's pay before being legislated to do so, all exercise some dimension of the God-power. I am not suggesting that we abandon critical analysis or prophetic commentary about Oprah or any other figure. In another part of scripture Jesus warns that not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" is on his side. In recent times the underbelly of the church has been exposed for sex abuse scandals and befriending imperialism. We must be careful to not be drawn into in-fighting when the powers of militarism, sexism, capitalism and patriarchy abound. Oprah is not perfect, but when she challenges unchecked sexual exploitation I want to be on her side. I do not choose to follow Islam but when Palestinians decry the oppression of Israeli and western imperialism, I want to be on their side.

The spiritual conversation groups helped me realize there is a bit of a hornet's nest in this morning's sermon topic which I confess I didn't recognize at the outset. I welcome your comments this week, in person, on the blog or by email. For the moment, I find direction in Jesus' words to his disciples, "Whoever is not against us, is for us." Amen.