

## Discovering Our Vocation – Brian Hartley

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

It's finally here. For some of us, it has come all-too-soon while, for others, it has been a grueling wait to get through the summer and to, at long last, arrive. But, whatever place one finds one's self, with the onset of this weekend it is all too clear that summer is receding into our rearview mirror and the new school year is upon us. For those of us in the teaching profession, it is also a reminder that, though our students remain perpetually the same age, we are yet another year older and the distance between us and them has grown ever wider. So, while we may have the tendency to think, "I remember what college is all about," we really don't. Most of the equipment that students haul into their dorm rooms wasn't even invented when I first arrived in Greenville and the idea of "going off to school" as I remember it—complete with not seeing my parents for three or four months with only a few letters and the obligatory bi-weekly telephone call in-between—is completely foreign to many of you who have cars, cell phones, and Skype—through which today's students seem to remain perpetually tethered to a world outside of Greenville College.

But, what has remained the same, I believe, is the desire to discover one's self and one's calling in life—to at least experiment with that thing that we call "vocation." And, in an age when the very outcomes of higher education are being questioned, this idea of who and whose we are and to what we are called is perhaps even more important than in the past. The reality, Craig Dykstra maintains, is that "we live in a society in which what one does, what one's occupation is, is perhaps the most powerful single public—and usually often internally personal—index that regulates who one is perceived to be, and perhaps even of who one is. Work matters. It shapes our identity and character as well as providing a means for our own financial and physical well being. Moreover, it provides us one of our most important avenues for making a contribution of some good to the larger society," ("The Theological Exploration of Vocation").

Today's lectionary texts address something of this idea—the Old Testament directly and the Gospel somewhat more indirectly. All of them operate within a worldview in which God's Kingdom is central and in which human beings understand themselves to be creatures designed to be in relationship to the Creator. All of these may be tenets by which we hope to live our lives. But what distinguishes our age from theirs is our quintessential belief in the sovereignty of the individual over against the community which surrounds us. And, so, as we enter into the dominant dialogue that is provided in the juxtaposition of the Gospel lesson alongside the prophetic text, we musn't forget that the ultimate goal towards which we as a people are headed is one framed in the scripture lesson from Hebrews today which clearly is that of a festal celebration. Here we see the community at worship with the Christian faithful inclusive of all those who have trusted in God prior even to the coming of the Gospel in Jesus Christ. That is, our place in God's Kingdom can never be separated from the *Communio Sanctorum*—"the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, the righteous made perfect" (Hebrews

12:23). And, it is only as we come to discover ourselves as a part of this larger community of faith that we can make sense of the God we serve and of our vocation as part and parcel of this larger church of Jesus Christ.

With this communal understanding as a background, I'd like to suggest that our ultimate vocation is to participate in God's reconciling work, of setting all things "right" in the world. And this sense of vocation develops as we, like the prophet Jeremiah, come to understand that we are claimed, that we are called, and that we are commissioned in service to this God and as a part of the larger purposes of His people.

In his classic study of the prophets, the great Jewish scholar of the past century, Abraham Heschel, portrays his subjects as iconoclasts who speak one octave too high and who are called to depict the dramatic tension in the inner life of God. The result was oftentimes a life of sorrow and anguish, loneliness and misery. This calling stands in contradistinction to our 21<sup>st</sup>-century cultural desires which feed off of celebrities and a lust for fifteen minutes of fame. While hundreds may que up for a chance to appear on "American Idol," few raised their hand 2500 years ago when God went looking for a prophet. For, as Frederick Buechner wrote many years ago, "The prophets were drunk on God, and in the presence of their terrible tipsiness no one was ever comfortable," (Wishful Thinking, 74-75).

The prophet Jeremiah found himself living in perilous times—his life spanned the reigns of the last kings of Judah in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and early 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE and the arc of his ministry went from bad to worse. Called upon to continually bring bad news to the crown, he was eventually dumped into a deep well. The prophet was ignored and ridiculed but rode out the 18 months or so of starvation in Jerusalem only to witness the sack of the city and the destruction of the temple. He was carted off into captivity and, according to legend, was eventually put to death by stoning by the very people for whom he had given his life. Heschel says that his "was a soul in pain, stern with gloom...He called, he urged his people to repent—and he failed. He screamed, wept, moaned—and was left with terror in his soul," (The Prophets 1:105). The life and ministry of this prophet thus stands as a stark rebuke to those who so flippantly and ardently market our current version of the so-called "health and wealth" gospel.

What Jeremiah did, however, have from the very beginning was a sense that he had been claimed by God. Most commentators suggest that the narrative, here in chapter one, begins in his youth—probably his early twenties. And yet, even this is not really where his story starts: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," the text says. The parallelism elicited here draws us back into the opening pages of Genesis where, in the second Creation story, God forms the earth-creature from the dust of the earth. Curiously, this is the same term that Jeremiah, himself, will use to describe the people in his famous "I am the potter, you are the clay," analogy. But, he is not only formed but consecrated—that is, "set apart," as well. Through both of these terms it is made abundantly clear that the prophet has been claimed by God, not now that he is a young adult—but even in utero, as it were.

We, here at St. Paul's, celebrate this reality on a regular basis with our children. While we know that they will need to grow and develop and affirm the faith for their own, we also know that God lays claim on them well before they come of age. And, just as we must pass through the birth waters and the people of Israel had to pass through the waters of the Reed Sea, they, too, pass through the waters of baptism. You see, God doesn't wait to claim us until we are ready or we have somehow magically come of age. God claims us and shapes us in and through the community of faith. And it is important that we don't somehow attach our fragile sense of faith only to some frozen moment from our adolescence or some heightened emotional experience. We are called to never forget that before we ever took one step towards God, God through God's prevenient grace and love reached out to us and claimed us for his own. And, this is the first key element in our understanding of Christian vocation.

The second key element surrounds what has classically been understood as one's calling in life. And, here, Jeremiah shares a somewhat similar episode with other prophets, such as Isaiah or Ezekiel. Unlike so many of our self-proclaimed solipsistic, individualistic, and privatized understandings, Jeremiah's sense of vocation is embedded in his careful listening for the voice of God. Unfortunately, we are surrounded by such a miasma of sound, a cacophonous din created by a multiplicity of electronic devices, that we are usually quite deaf not only to God, but to others. The irony of course is that we pride ourselves on our so-called connectivity when, in reality, the artificiality of our disembodied existence renders us quite lonely—as Dr. Sherry Turkle, Professor at MIT, documents so vividly in her recent book, *Alone Together*. If a sense of vocation is predicated first on listening, this requires us to find ways of disconnecting from this artificial existence, at least at times, and of learning to be still before God.

The semantic basis of the Latin word, *vocare*, centers around the dynamics of learning to carefully listen and discern that which is the voice of God from other competing voices. And this requires a community for it is only in community that we can begin to gain the skills necessary for such discernment. One of the most difficult, yet necessary, roles that some of us are called to play is that of the voice of the church which may gainsay what a person has come to believe. There have been numerous occasions when I have sat with colleagues to counsel a young man or woman who clearly has neither the gifts or graces for ordained ministry, yet has mistaken their passion for service to God with such. As Frederick Buechner reminds us in his classic definition of vocation, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet," (*Wishful Thinking*, 95) and it oftentimes takes a group of trusted friends and mentors to help us discern both. Without the spiritual disciplines of silence, solitude, spiritual direction, and conference, we may well mistake God's calling for something quite different.

But, having carefully listened to God's calling, the prophet is then commissioned and sent forth for the hard task to which he will give the rest of his life. According to the text, God sends forth His hand and "touches" young Jeremiah's mouth. Yet, this is no gentle or comforting touch. The Hebrew verb rendered here can also mean "to strike," and it forever marks the prophet—much like Jacob, having wrestled with the mysterious heavenly visitor in Genesis, who

is left to limp off into the sunset. Having God's words placed on one's lips, as Isaiah learns, is no pleasant experience. It changes one forever, perhaps leaving a wound or a scar, and we leave the encounter forever changed. Unlike our cultural anticipation of a clap on the back, entering into God's service means being forever branded as the apostle Paul claimed, "a servant of Jesus of Christ." We are commissioned, as it were, to take up our cross and to follow our Lord and Savior.

Claimed, called, and commissioned, then, we enter this painful broken world. Yet, we do not go alone—we are a part of something much bigger, much greater. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, paints a picture of God reconciling the world to God's self and says that we, too, are called to participate in this reconciling work. And, I think, we gain at least a glimmer of what this might look like from today's Gospel lesson. For here, Jesus dares to notice a woman who has been marginalized by society and confined to the shadowlands of her community. And, though Luke never provides us with the woman's name, Jesus, himself, gives her a name—"daughter of Abraham." This person who has never experienced acceptance now comes to know what it means to be named and claimed as a part of God's covenant community.

This stands in stark contrast with the way she is identified at the beginning of the story—as simply "the bent woman." According to the Evangelist, the condition from which she suffered had been both long-term (18 years) and totally incapacitating. We miss out on the storyteller's play with words here in the Greek as he emphasizes that she cannot raise herself up "at all." The reference here is not just to one's physical incapacity, but to one's emotional, psychological, and spiritual state. This crippled woman has endured a kind of bentness and brokenness that has rendered her completely crushed in body, soul, and mind. Her marginalization is "all-complete."

Typically, when Jesus restores a person in the gospels, the gospel writers, and particularly Luke, have a word to describe what it is that Jesus is up to. The healing has a therapeutic quality to it and so such narratives are oftentimes called stories of healing from the verb, "therapeuo." But this woman suffers from a different kind of malady—one which has smothered her very humanity and rendered her bent beneath its weight. She doesn't just need a simple "healing"; she requires to be released from her bondage and restored—literally, to be "made straight." And, so, this is how this particular story is rendered—fulfilling, we should understand from the beginning of the gospel, Jesus' own proclamation that his ministry was to be centered on "release to the captives."

At the end of the gospel and the beginning of Luke's second volume, The Acts of the Apostles, this rendering of the Good News—as participation in God's work of bending the world back to its original intent—stands at the heart of what it means to be the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. And it is to this vision that the apostle Paul appeals when he writes to the Corinthians and to the other churches scattered throughout the Mediterranean. And, I would like to suggest, that, this is the mission of a lifetime—this is our true vocational calling as the people of God. We are sent, not alone, but together to be a part of the greatest mission ever

conceived—nothing less than God’s restoration of the Creation back to God’s self. And it is this opportunity of engaging those weighed down on the margins of life and seeing them brought back to health and wholeness that is our true vocation.

But in order to join in on this mission, we must not only identify with the life of Jesus but with his death, as well. We are called to walk the way of the cross. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded his young seminarians, “Jesus bids us come and die.” Fifty years ago this coming week, this message was contextualized in a way which oftentimes receives only a cursory glance during Black History Month. That is unfortunate. In many ways, we are content to simply whitewash the legacy of Dr. King along with the countless others who committed themselves to the Civil Rights struggle. It was hard work and as those who have read the early life of King now, it was not particularly a calling that he, himself, went looking for. In describing his own experience, King wrote, “My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something, on the contrary it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity.”

Discovering our vocation is always a little bit like that. As we see so clearly in the larger story of Dr. King, it is not so much a matter of our trying to figure out some enigmatic piece of the puzzle but of learning to be quiet and to listen for the voice of God. It means paying close attention to the times in which we live and, perhaps most importantly, to the voice of the Christian community of which we are a part. For, it is here, in this place, as we learn to become vulnerable to one another and dare to speak the truth to one another, that we are claimed, called, and commissioned and drawn into the larger story of God’s redemptive activity begun at Creation, extended at the cross and empty tomb, and continually made manifest today through Christ’s church. In the end, the secret of life, Buechner reminds us is that, “From the simplest lyric to the most complex novel and densest drama, (we are asked) to pay attention. Pay attention to the frog. Pay attention to the west wind. Pay attention to the boy on the raft, the lady in the tower, the old man on the train. In sum, pay attention to the world and all that dwells therein and thereby learn at last to pay attention to yourself and all that dwells therein,” (Whistling in the Dark). May God grant us the strength so to do. Amen.