

May 18, 2014
Northwood United Church

I know you are probably expecting a reader to come up now, but the sermon today is going to be a little different – do not be afraid!

I just couldn't get past that John 10:10 passage from last week that I talked about with the kids: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly". There are volumes of books in print about that one verse – there are thousands of sermons, so many interpretations.

I have been reflecting a lot on the work of Dr. Sallie McFague – she is one of the worlds leading ecological theologians and so some of what I will share is inspired from her writings.

I just wanted to bring you along on my journey with it this week, so we are going to start in a totally different place and I'll do my best to bring you along – with Deborah's help – and if you don't like it, don't blame her, she didn't know what I was up to. But if you do like it, probably she should take a lot of credit. Ok Deborah, first reading if you please.

Jeremiah Reading

There are stories all through the Bible about the ways God calls us into service to God and Gods people. They weave a tale of understanding that we are all called into ministry in a thousand different ways. They also reveal the many ways that we respond when God is calling. Lets listen to the story of Jeremiah's call:

This is what GOD said:

⁵ "Before I shaped you in the womb,
I knew all about you.
Before you saw the light of day,
I had holy plans for you:
A prophet to the nations—
that's what I had in mind for you."

⁶ But I said, "Hold it, Master GOD! Look at me.
I don't know anything. I'm only a boy!"

⁷⁻⁸ GOD told me, "Don't say, 'I'm only a boy.'
I'll tell you where to go and you'll go there.
I'll tell you what to say and you'll say it.
Don't be afraid of a soul.
I'll be right there, looking after you."
GOD's Decree.

⁹⁻¹⁰ GOD reached out, touched my mouth, and said,
"Look! I've just put my words in your mouth—hand-delivered!
See what I've done? I've given you a job to do
among nations and governments—a red-letter day!
Your job is to pull up and tear down,
take apart and demolish,

And then start over,
building and planting.”

Calling. Our faith stories tell us that we are all called. This is language that we are used to hearing when it comes to folks who are called into the vocation of Ministry. But even outside the church people use the term. When you see someone who is working to their gifts; a teacher who is a *teacher*. They embody it. A nurse, a surgeon, a landscaper, a chef – we will sometimes use that call word. But we hesitate to use it on ourselves. Why do you think that is? I don't think it's a false humility or lack of self esteem or just not knowing. We are called, each of us, as Christians to serve God and Gods people (which is everyone). I would use the word ministry. Each of us is called into ministry. One of my professors at seminary would say that we are all called into sainthood – I'll talk about that in a minute.

But I want to go back to our story from Jeremiah, where God says, “before you saw the light of day, I had holy plans for you. A prophet for the nations, that's what I had in mind for you.” Oh, no big deal, just a prophet for *all the nations*.” God had big work for Jeremiah.

God has big plans for each of us.

And how does Jeremiah respond? “Hold it!...look at me, I don't know anything, I am only a boy.”

It took me almost 10 years to even acknowledge the fact that I was called to ordained ministry. Once I was barely able to say it out loud (yes that was actually in seminary), the old testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, were one of the first things I studied intensely, academically, at grad school. Not that I am embodied with such hubris that I think I am called to be a prophet for the nations, but Jeremiahs response were the words I heard every day in my own head. Hold it God! Look at me! I don't know anything! I'm only a girl!

So what happens next in the story – God gives him assurances. “God told me, don't say I am only a boy. I'll tell you where to go and you'll go there. I'll tell you what to say and you'll say it. Don't be afraid of a soul. I'll be right there, looking after you.” I'll be right there, looking after you.

Now, some of you will know exactly what I am talking about. You will have that spot in your heart where you just *know* you are being called, and where you are being called to, and what you are being called to. And others might be thinking I'm not called, I haven't heard it. I might offer, you haven't heard it *yet*, but know that you are called. Or maybe there are some folks who were called, and have lived into that calling, and are clear that that call is finished, and haven't discerned what the next one is just yet. Maybe the story of young Jeremiah doesn't resonate. Don't forget about Abraham and Sarah who were called late late in their lives. We are a part of a faith tradition of calling.

I am going to pass it back to Deborah for another piece of Scripture before I go on.

John 20 Reading

There are people in our lives that we can just know are sent by God, but our faith stories tell us that we are all called and sent. In John 20, after the resurrection, Jesus appears to Mary, and we pick up that story in verse 19,

“¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.””

See? New testament too. You aren't getting out of here easy on this one!

But I do want to ask, have you ever seen or encountered or been close someone who you knew, *knew* were doing God's work in the world? I am talking about someone who embodied the Bible. Who walked the talk of our faith stories. Real life disciples; mini incarnations of love. These folks who live a Christ – like life, people often describe as being *fully alive*. These are folks who maybe struggled to discern where they were being called, but when they got it, they were able to express that reality in every part of their lives. You can just so clearly see Gods action in and through their lives. When I think of someone whose personal theologies became fully embodied in themselves, I can't help but think of someone like the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr. Once he got a grasp on what he was being called to do, he took action, he probably even sought out those words of comfort that we have written that God spoke to Jeremiah. And even to the end of his life, he worked towards that mission.

In bible study this week we talked about Stephen in Acts, speaking the truth right until the very end. I'm going to stop for just a minute, and ask you to think about this. Is there a public figure, a relative, a friend, a neighbour, that comes to your mind as someone who just clearly, walks the talk?

A moment of reflection

Ok now, remember I am new here, so I don't know what you have and haven't done in church. But since you have, what I am hoping, is a new neighbour beside you this morning, I would invite you to turn to them and tell them; who the person is, and in what way they walk the talk of their faith.

Moments of conversation

Thank you – maybe two more minutes to finish up?

We are going to go back into the Hebrew Scriptures for another story – Deborah?

Jacob wrestling story from Genesis

In Genesis we hear of Jacob and his family who are trying to follow where God is leading. After some travels, confusion, and fear, we pick up the story.

²²⁻²³ But during the night he got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He got them safely across the brook along with all his possessions.

²⁴⁻²⁵ But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint.

²⁶ The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak."

Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."

²⁷ The man said, "What's your name?"

He answered, "Jacob."

²⁸ The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through."

²⁹ Jacob asked, "And what's your name?"

The man said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And then, right then and there, he blessed him.

³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!"

³¹⁻³² The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip. (This is why Israelites to this day don't eat the hip muscle; because Jacob's hip was thrown out of joint.)

Maybe you know where this is going? This concept of wrestling with God is something that, I believe, every person must come to at some point in their lives, sometimes, several times in their lives. These folks, like Martin Luther King Jr. And the others you discussed are what I might call mature Christians. These are folks who have done the difficult work of rigorous religious reflection, which then translates to being able to articulate a personal credo, their own religious story. And then it becomes action in the world. It becomes theological practice where their religious identity seeps into each corner of their lives to the point where their existence gives glory to God by so loving the world.

This is our job. To begin the wrestling process. To examine life and discern Gods action. AND THEN to express Gods power and love in everything, *everything* we do.

I would call this a working theology, which just means ones deeply held beliefs that actually function in our personal and private lives. You might also consider this responsible discipleship; where worldview, commitments, and lifestyle are in line with Gods will. Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented that he started as a theologian, became a Christian, and finally grew into a

contemporary – which kind of means that his approach to Christianity was academic, then practicing, then present. Where are you in that spectrum?

I understand, this sounds a lot like work. But I want to go back to that concept that I spoke about earlier – using my professor’s words – that we are all called into sainthood. I don’t mean that we are called into perfection, or we are called into some great pious attitude, or pulling away from “the sins of the world”. It’s quite the opposite actually. We are called into sainthood so that we can be brave enough to go deep enough with God that we internalize our beliefs so that they are evident in all we do (even in traffic). AND from that place, our call is bright, clear, the *only* option for our lives.

And it is that which brings me full circle – Deborah?

John 10: 10 reading

Last week we heard these words from Jesus in John, and we reflect back on them again today,

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Abundant life. What does that mean? What does that mean to us, mostly middle class, Canadians? I think that we might all agree that Jesus’ idea of the abundant life wouldn’t involve BMWs and super-vacations, but what might we need to look at?

I might suggest that this involves a shift in our perception of Christianity. Most of us North Americans approach Christianity in an anthropocentric way – that is, we see human beings as the most important part of God’s creation. This has been perpetuated by the translation of the words in Genesis which, in English, suggest this idea of humans being given dominance over the rest of creation, but the original context of the words and those around it suggest more of a role as caretaker or helper almost. This can help us take a bit of a different approach to the idea of abundant life. For one, what about the notion of all of creation being gifted with a life that flourishes? Maybe not just people, but also, say, polar bears? So, what are we doing that might be siphoning off the good life from the rest of creation? Or even, other humans? We might not like to pay the extra \$4 for fairly traded coffee, but maybe some of the choices we make so that we, here in this context might have a notion of life abundant, is squashing the abundant life of Gods other children on the other side of the globe.

I am going to invite you to try on an idea of Christianity that is no longer anthropocentric, but rather cosmological. That peace and justice – that is, the abundant life, the flourishing of life, the kingdom of God – isn’t achieved *until* it is achieved for all of God’s creatures.

Let’s just pause for a moment and try to do a little visualization. I would invite you to close your eyes, and picture yourself on a trail in the forest. Take a deep breath. You can smell the dampness, you can smell the greenery, the earth. When you look down, you see small ferns coming to be, little purple flowers opening. You see old, fallen trees serving as a platform for new life. Beside you, there are salmon berry bushes with their bright pink flowers preparing the way for those tart orange berries. And you see the giant trunks of ancient trees. Follow a trunk

up, up, see the boughs, see the foliage, the evergreens above your head. They were here long before you and will remain long after you. This spot, this moment of silence in the forest puts it into perspective. Where we fit in the midst of creation, where we are in the great scheme of things. Gently come back to this place, but I would encourage you to visit a forest at some time this week.

This deep understanding of our place inside of God's creation, as opposed to over or more important, brings us full circle back to the idea that we are all called to serve. So if we can trust that, and do the important work of discerning God's work in our lives and fully embodying that, no matter our age or stage in life, then we can understand in the depth of our being, how we fit, and the action that we can take. And it no longer feels like guilt, or that "s" swear word *should*, but rather we are free to love God's world in every breath, in every decision, at every corner. Free to do that. It does sound kind of like sainthood doesn't it?

May that be so for each one of us.

Amen.