

The Calling: Revisited
Ephesians 4:1-6/Luke 4:16-30/Isaiah 61:1-3
FPC/February 7, 2010
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I. Introduction

Build the walls! So the command echoed down the streets of Jerusalem. After a generation of captivity in Babylon the Jews had returned to Jerusalem. They returned with grand visions and great expectations. But what they found were ruins, and never ending hard work. It was difficult to be the people of God. In time the visions faded. In time the expectations disappeared. In time they became more like the people all around them.....people who believed in other gods, and practiced other ways of life. The city walls were still in ruins. The temple was incomplete. And people stopped asking what it meant to be the people of God.

Build the walls! So Ezra and Nehemiah commanded to the disillusioned and disappointed people of Jerusalem. They came with energy, purpose and vision. They were leaders. The walls went up. And other walls went up too. Strict obedience to the law was enforced. The temple was completed and sacrifices were offered. Those married to non-Jews were encouraged to divorce their spouses. The vision was that God's people build walls. And maybe it was necessary to do that so to survive. But certain attitudes and actions also grew; we're in and you're out, we're God's people and you're not, we're chosen by God and you're forgotten.....chaff blown away by the wind. Walls were built.

But there was another vision. It was a vision not about walls. It was the vision of Isaiah. We see some of that vision in our Call to Worship from Isaiah 61. The vision of Isaiah is that God's desire is to redeem the whole world. The vision of Isaiah is that chosen means service in God's mission, not privilege. The vision of Isaiah is a welcome, and not walls. But the walls were built. Fearful people will do that. And the vision of Isaiah slept until in God's time it awakened.

A young rabbi in his home synagogue spoke the vision of Isaiah (Luke 4:16-30). Jesus chose to read the vision from Isaiah 61 that day, and when he was done he said, "Now's the time. Now's the time for God's redemption in the world. Now's the time when God will gather the lost and forgotten. Now's the time for the walls to come down." In Luke 4 we see that the hometown crowd didn't like that vision much, as Jesus suggested that the vision of God's salvation included Gentiles. They were people of walls, not welcome.....still fearful after all those years. And still certain that the people of God were to be about walls, and not a welcome to outsiders.....like Gentiles.

But the vision of Isaiah would be the way of Jesus' ministry all the way to the cross.....and to the empty tomb; welcome in God's grace, and not walls.

The vision of Isaiah found its way into the church also. It was a struggle, as church folks are more comfortable with walls instead welcome also. But because of the gift of God's Holy Spirit some folks in the church saw the vision: God's desire to redeem the whole world; chosen for service and not privilege; welcome and not walls. That's the "worthy calling" of the church.....God's calling to every church.....God's worthy calling to us, First Presbyterian Church....not walls, but a welcome.

II. Text

Read Ephesians 4:1-6.

III. Brief Exegesis

The first half of Ephesians is about the grace and activity of God for us. God the Father chooses us for redemption before the first light of creation. God the Son saves us from the power of sin and death. And God the Holy Spirit abides with us, and is the reminder of God's promise of the new creation for us. The first three chapters of Ephesians are all about the depth and richness of God's grace for us (good Presbyterian theology).

(v.1) But in Ephesians 4 there's a change. Now, the writer says, we have an important part to play: "I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." God's grace and call has changed everything. We are different people with a different destiny. The writer begs Christians to live together in a way that is worthy of this grace, this calling and this activity of God for us.

(vv.2-3) In general terms the writer goes on to describe the character of this new way of life.....the character of this "calling".....the character of this worthy way of life together; humility, gentleness, patience, love, unity and peace. It's the way of Jesus. This way of life together is different than the way of life around us, and becomes the "new normal" for members of the Church. The "new normal" is like the new way of life when the baby first comes home, or when the last child heads off to college. It's like when you move to a new city, get married, or start a new job. There's a "new normal" to your life. It isn't like it used to be. It can't be like it used to be. It shouldn't be like it used to be. There's been a big change, and you have to live a different way.

That's the point here; God's "calling" for a new way of life has come, and it requires a different way. Everything has changed, and the old ways don't fit anymore.

God's Holy Spirit works with our wills, our choosing, and we start to live together as a church in a different way: Seek the spotlight? No, humility. Run over the top of others? No, gentleness. Wanting it now? No, patience. Holding grudges? No, love. Gossiping? No, unity. Stirring things up and causing divisions? No, peace. It's a different way.....living the Christian story together.

Build walls? No, build window and doors.....and go outside any walls, so those who don't know God might see the grace of God, and the kingdom of God where they are welcome. In God's time it's the vision of Isaiah and the way of Jesus in the life of the Church.

(vv.4-6) Finally this plea to "live a life worthy of our calling from God" ends with a confession of unity. This confession may trace its roots to the very early church.....a very early confession of faith; one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God. This is not about uniformity. It's not about everyone riding motorcycles, drinking coffee and eating chocolate chip cookies (I may like that, but you're different). Rather it's about a given unity grounded in one God. There is only one God, one Savior Jesus Christ, one Holy Spirit, and one body of Christ/the Church, and one great promise of God's salvation for all creation. On the surface it may look different at times, in different cultures, in different generations.....different in the different traditions of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant.....but there is a basic, foundational unity; one God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one Church, and one hope.

I have two younger brothers. We're very different. One of my brothers works in a parts department of a large General Motors dealership in Salem, Oregon. The other brother lives in Kansas City, Missouri, and is on the road during the week as a salesman for a tractor-trailer lift gate company. And here I am, a pastor in Sharon, Pennsylvania. We look different. We have different ways of life. We cheer for different football teams. We have drifted apart at times.....life does that. But we find ways to get back together. Our unity isn't about uniformity. Rather it's about the unity of family...the unity of brothers in a family that was given to us. We don't have to create it. It's already been done. But we do have to do the work of cultivating it, believing it, and discovering it again and again.

I think that's the idea here. The unity of the Church is not uniformity. Rather it's unity grounded in the nature and work of God. It's something we're given.....something we simply are because we're chosen by God for salvation. We don't have to create it. But we do have to cultivate it, believe it, and discover it again and again.

IV. Reflections

Build the walls! The command is still given. We followers of Jesus are still sometimes a fearful bunch. Build the walls! We're in, and you're out. We're chosen, and you're not. We have a great hope, and you're forgotten. We're going.....and you're "left behind."

But what would happen if instead of building walls, we built the kingdom of God? Here's something I noticed. Too often salvation is reduced to "going to heaven when I die." It's limited to me, in the future, and somewhere else;heaven. But salvation in this text, in the Bible, and in the purposes of God is a lot bigger. It's also about us, now and right here. Salvation is also about living together in a new way, and bearing witness to the coming new age of God's kingdom. Salvation is not about hiding behind walls and just "hanging on." Rather it's about the vision of Isaiah, and the way of Jesus. It's about life together characterized by humility, gentleness, patience, bearing with each other in love, unity and peace.

I recently read of a Presbyterian Church in northern India that is an indigenous church composed of the "untouchable" people in that culture. They are victims of a vile form of injustice know as the caste system in Hindu culture. Though it is officially illegal, it continues to thrive, and crush the lives and hopes of the poorest people. By Hindu law, children of the "untouchables" can only be given a derogatory name at birth (i.e. stupid, ugly, manure). But at this Presbyterian Church in northern India something special happens. When an "untouchable" confesses faith in Jesus Christ and becomes a member of the church, he or she is given a new name (like Joy, Grace, Hope). In light of the grace of God for all people that follower of Jesus steps into a new identity with a new name, and into a new life with a new hope. (Mark Labberton, The Dangerous Act of Worship, p.120).

This isn't India, but the Church, our church, can give new names to each other.....names like "Forgiven, Welcome, and Loved." Why build walls when we can build the kingdom of God, or at least glimpses of it, right now and right here?

And why build walls when we're called to build life together "worthy of our calling from God?" We live in a time when the Church is increasingly divided over the ordination of gay and lesbian folks. Churches are leaving denominations, and people are leaving churches over this issue. In all the emotion of the conflicts the reality of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God seems lost.

I don't want to suggest that this issue is of little significance. Nor do I want to say that there is one clear answer and everyone should agree. But what I do know is that my list of theological reasons for leaving the church is very short. Those core beliefs are the trinity, the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, the resurrection, the Church as the universal people of God, and the authority and inspiration of scripture. Short of denying those things, I'm staying, even if I'm not in full agreement with a particular position or practice, now or in the future. I believe that the reality of one God, one Savior, one Church, one faith and one hope in the promises of God is all greater than the disagreements over homosexuality and ordination.

When I mention the Presbyterian Book of Order I usually get one of two responses. Either I get the "surprised.....what are you talking about?" look. Or I get the "rolling of eyes, bedtime reading when you want to go to sleep" look. But in our Book of Order there is some great practical theology and wisdom for life together as a church. In one section in the first chapter (G-1.0304) there is the affirmation that "truth is order to goodness." That means that truth is good, and we want to pursue it. Without that anything and everything would be OK. And then immediately following that (G-1.0305) there is the affirmation that "good people of sound judgment will disagree about the implications of the truth." That means that good, faithful folks will sometimes disagree over what they understand and believe the truth to be, such as in the ordination of gay and lesbian folks. And I have certainly found that to be true. So what should we do? Do you know what the Book of Order says: "It is the duty of both private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other." Mutual forbearance.....that's an interesting idea. Mutual forbearance.....that's maintaining the unity we are given, respecting each other, and practicing humility and patience. Mutual forbearance.....it's agreeing to disagree and staying in fellowship. Mutual forbearance... ..who knows.....it might help us mature as Christians.

Why build walls when we can be about the more important things of building life together in a time of fear, divisions and religious fanaticism?

Isaiah had a vision of God's salvation for the world. It slept for years. It awakened in life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the worthy call of God for the Church.....for First Presbyterian Church. And the day will come when the fearful cries of "Build the walls" will give way to the joyous laughter of "Welcome," and we will see the promises of God for us all.