

"The Calling"
Ephesians 4:1-6; Luke 19:1-10
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I. Introduction

Do you ever wonder about the conversations Jesus' disciples might have had.....the story behind the Bible story. I was thinking about that this week as I was reflecting on our text from Luke 19, the familiar story of Zacchaeus. Perhaps a conversation went something like this:

A1-Well, what do you think about today?

B1-You mean lunch at the tax collector's house?

A2-Yea.

B2-I never saw that coming.

A3-Me either.

B3-You would think that by now we might be used to some surprises with Jesus.

A4-I suppose so. But this was more than just a surprise.

B4-When the mayor of Jericho, the town leaders, and the synagogue leaders met us at the edge of town to welcome us, that was expected.

A5-And when the townspeople welcomed us, that felt good.

B5-Word about Jesus' preaching, teaching and healing has gotten out. People are interested. There are growing hopes about him. Some say, "Messiah."

A6-Yea, the crowd didn't really surprise me either.

B6-But what about lunch at the tax collector's house? I was shocked.

A7-Like everyone else I thought we'd be eating with the mayor and the community leaders. It's what you do around here.....it's our culture. It's how you show leaders respect. It's expected.

B7-I'm sure they had a lunch planned for us. And I bet the tax collector wasn't invited.

A8-Oh, I'm sure he wasn't. And I think that was Jesus' point; God's kingdom includes outsiders. God's grace is for the lost.

B8-Well, we know about that. Here we are; fishermen invited by Jesus to follow him.

A9-But a tax collector?

B9-I know, it's crazy. It turns everything upside down.

A10-And something else; it "ruffles feathers." The leaders in Jericho were embarrassed. They won't take this lying down. This way of Jesus may come with a cost.

B10-If Jesus is really showing us the way of God, the way of God's kingdom, the way of God's grace.....(pause)

A11-(pause).....then it is very different than we expected.

Jesus' teaching, preaching, healing and way of life are grounded in the grace of God for all people; the plan of God for us all before God first said, "Let there be light." In Jesus Christ the new age of God's kingdom has broken into this world, and "the call" comes to us to share in it. The life of the Church is to bear witness to this "call." That's the focus of our text in Ephesians this morning; "the call" to the Church to bear witness to the new age of the kingdom of God.

II. Summary

The first three chapters of Ephesians are a joyful, theological reflection on the salvation of God for all people, who together share in the one Church of God. God the Father has chosen us for salvation before the foundations of creation. God the Son has brought about that salvation in Jesus Christ. And God the Holy Spirit unites us to God through Jesus Christ, and seals us to receive the eternal promises of God in the new heaven and new earth. Reconciled to both God and each other by the cross of Jesus Christ, we are the one people of God, the Church, who are to bear witness to, and share in, God's mission of reconciliation for the world. That's the rich theology of Ephesians 1-3, the home of much Presbyterian theology.

But something new happens in Ephesians 4. The writer moves from theology to ethics, from big idea to what it means, from theory to life. And so in Ephesians 4 we begin the second half of the book, which begins with an exhortation to be whom we are called to be; chosen by God, saved by Jesus Christ, given the Holy Spirit.

III. Text: Read Ephesians 4:1-6

IV. Brief Exegesis

“I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” (Eph. 4:1) As the writer begins his encouragement, he mentions his own situation; “a prisoner in the Lord.” It may refer to being in prison because of his Christian faith. Christians in the 1st C CE proclaimed “Jesus is Lord,” not the Roman Emperor. That would get you arrested, and worse. So that may be what is referred to here. But I think it’s more. I think it also means “sold out for Jesus.” I think the writer is referring to being totally committed to the Christian faith as a follower of Jesus Christ. In poker terms, it’s like saying “I’m all in.” It’s no holding back, no dabbling, and no “just checking it out.”

I remember a few years ago we had Harold Kurtz here. Harold was a missionary, with a lot of charisma, and fascinated with what God was doing in the world. He did a great job of sharing here. Then the mission committee took Harold out for lunch. And I can still remember sitting around a table at the Hickory Grille, and Harold telling us about his latest mission trip to Siberia. The cold and snow there did not make it easy. But this 70+ year old man was so engaging, so enthusiastic, so taken with what God was doing in Siberia.....by the end of lunch we were all ready to go to Siberia with Harold on the next trip. Harold was “sold out,” “all in,” “a prisoner in the Lord.” If Harold can do it, why not me?

I think that’s what’s going on here. It’s as if he’s writing; “I’m a prisoner in the Lord, I’m all in.....how about you?”

“I, therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” This is not about a phone call, or the call of a friend from across the room. This is about the calling of God, a vocation, a way of life. Too often we limit the word to the “calling” of someone to mission, or to ministry. Here the meaning is different. It’s the “calling” of God to the Church.....the global church.....and God’s “calling” to us, First Presbyterian Church. God calls us out of the ways of the old world.....into the ways of the new kingdom of God.....into redemption, into new life, into the hope of God’s eternal promises, and into God’s mission in the world. God’s “calling” brings us into relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and into relationship with others called the body of Christ, or the Church. The “calling” is contrary often to the old world around us, and does crazy things like having lunch with Zacchaeus, or going to Siberia. The “calling” is about being our best as a community of Jesus Christ, and in that people catch a glimpse of the kingdom of God.

V. Reflection

The writer then goes on to discuss the nature of the church's life together when we are faithful to this "call;" humility, gentleness, patience, love unity and peace. Next week we'll think a little about that, as I'll come back to this text. But this week my mind and heart were captured by this idea of "leading a life together worthy of the calling to which we have been called" by God.

In the recent movie "Invictus" Morgan Freeman portrays anti-apartheid activist and former South African president Nelson Mandela. As Mandela begins his term as president apartheid has just ended, and South Africa is deeply divided economically and racially. Mandela believes the greatest hope for South Africa is for whites and blacks to come together to be one country, after decades of violence and mistrust.

A powerful symbol of this in "Invictus" is the South African rugby team the Springboks. To most blacks the rugby team is a symbol of the old apartheid system, and must be disbanded. But to Mandela the Springboks rugby team, and the fact that South Africa was hosting the 1995 Rugby World Cup, was a great opportunity to use sport to bring whites and blacks together. Mandela believes deeply that it's important to keep the Springboks, and redefine them as a symbol of the new South Africa, white and black.

In an especially powerful scene the new sports commission of South Africa unanimously approves the exact opposite of what Mandela believes; the end of the team, colors and name of the Springboks. Mandela immediately hears of this, so he rushes over to the sports commission to speak to them, so to make every effort to get them to change their minds. On the way over his assistant advises him:

"I strongly advise you against doing this. You risk alienating your cabinet and your party. You're risking your political capital. You're risking your future as our leader."

Mandela then looks at his assistant and responds: "The day I am afraid to do this is the day I am no longer fit to lead."

Wow.....when I heard that I wanted to stand up and cheer. He risked everything to do the right thing. Mandela is on to "lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."

We have a small group of folks from our Presbytery in Sudan now. After going there a few years ago with a few members of our church and our Presbytery I've remained interested in Sudan. This past week I got a brief email from one of my friends there now, Jim Leuenberger, pastor at Bethany Presbyterian Church in Mercer. Jim wrote:

"I am deeply impressed at the way the leadership of the Presbyterian Church here carries out the visions God puts on their hearts. They believe God is calling them

to start new presbyteries and they begin them. They feel called to feed the hungry people of the western part of the country in Darfur, and they risk their lives going to do it. They feel called to begin a church in a remote area and send out a 23 year old newly trained evangelist and the work commences and succeeds through the power of God and their obedient sacrificial and trusting service. These are not people of mere words but of bold action.”

“I therefore, a prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” That’s what’s happening in Sudan.

“...lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” That verse catches me. It grabs my attention. Maybe it’s because I’m the typical first born, pressing and pushing, driven, high achiever. But I think its right. I want to live into the fullness of my call by God. And I want to be part of God’s Church that is also living into the fullness of that call. “Sold out for Christ.....All in.....a prisoner in the Lord,” bearing witness to the coming kingdom of God. “.....lead a life worthy of calling to which you have been called,” sometimes I think I have done that, and sometimes I know I have not.....but the gracious call comes again, and I get up and try again.

In the 50’s and 60’s First Presbyterian Church had a clear sense of its call. But it’s a different day. It’s a different community around us. There are different needs. We are a different community of faith. “.....lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” What does that mean today?

I think we’re getting a better sense of that call. We worship together in a culture that does not value “Sunday morning church,” and so we are counter-cultural and bear witness to Someone bigger than ourselves. We are encouraging prayer and Bible study in a time when most people rarely do either, because it is the way of God’s people. We are trying to find ways to care for each other, and practice hospitality in a day when people are more and more alone. We care for this sacred space in a time when holiness seems far away. We are looking to share the arts in a community that longs for beauty. And we have a growing mission program in an age of great need.....and we hope that mission will become less a program, and more just a way of our life together....just what we do.

“.....lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” Sometimes I think we have done that. Sometimes I know we have not. But the gracious call comes again, and we get up and we try again.....living a life together worthy of the One we call Lord.

