

Our Calling: Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, Yr C. Jer 1:4-10; Ps 71:1-6; I Cor 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-31

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

We like to be chosen, singled out, particularly when the alternative is to be left out. We may have memories of being chosen, or not chosen, perhaps memories of grade school team selection at recess. Watching the faces of classmates not chosen but added to the team by default, still bothers me.

But being chosen for a team is one thing; being chosen by God, another. And to be chosen by God to speak for God before the nations, well that would be daunting, which is how Jeremiah reacted.

There are numerous call stories in the OT, some with the one being called hearing the voice of God, while others having a more visual experience of being called. Almost all, including Jeremiah in our reading today, resisted the notion they were being called, and offered excuses. Remember when God called Moses from the burning bush? Moses right away said, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" When God appoints Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah immediately says, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Neither excuse worked.

I immediately wondered as I read the story of Jeremiah's call if, God would provide Jeremiah with training, practice sessions or written instructions. But a close reading suggests there was no internship or probationary period for Jeremiah. You're already a prophet, so start-today-speaking to the nations what God tells you to say.

In our Gospel reading, it is clear that Jesus has already started his ministry, since his hometown had heard the healings he had been doing in Capernaum. I wonder whether Jesus had a sense of being called? Is that an irreverent question to ask? I don't think so. Retreating so often to pray, and his prayers in the Garden of Gethsemane suggest Jesus did wrestle with what he was called to do.

On his first visit to Nazareth, not long after his baptism, Jesus' response was not to cater to the home town folk, but rather to proclaim that God is doing, and will do, the unexpected.

Jesus begins his talk in the temple, as we heard last Sunday, by quoting from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

After these references about those we would recognize as the underprivileged and marginalized of society, Jesus added that “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

So far, so good. Jesus has identified himself with the promised Messiah, the anointed one. The people were astonished at the gracious words that came from his lips. But then Jesus then added, “Doubtless ... you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” And Jesus noted that he expected they were thinking, Doctor cure yourself, probably meaning, take care of our problems first. And then Jesus added an ominous note, “No prophet is accepted by his hometown.” Almost an invitation to be tossed out. By this point we can imagine the people of Nazareth wondering where Jesus is going with his references to well known sayings. They were anxious for the miracles to start.

Why did Jesus guess what the crowd would say instead of waiting and responding to what he hears? Jesus speaks well and if he does some healings, he'll be seen as a home town boy who made good.

But Jesus words become even more puzzling. He says that in the time of the great prophet Elijah there was a famine, and Israel was full of starving widows. But Elijah was sent to none of them but rather to minister to a Gentile widow in Sidon, outside of Israel. And during the time of Elijah's successor Elisha, there were many lepers among the Jews of Israel, but none of them were cleansed. Rather, Elisha was sent outside of the country to heal the Syrian Gentile, Naaman, an officer in a foreign army that was a long time threat to Israel.

What I hear Jesus saying to his neighbors in Nazareth is that God, through Jesus' ministry, would be doing something new, something outside the expected, the comfortable. Who would have expected Israel's great prophets to minister to Gentiles when Hebrew people were in need? Jesus was saying that God's anointed one, God's Messiah, cannot be boxed in by our expectations and wishes.

The people quickly turned on Jesus with anger and drove him out of town.

Why were Jesus' brief words so upsetting? Probably it was the repetition of the phrase “None of them” referring to the Israelites. Jesus was not offering a seal of approval of the status quo, but rather was conveying a message that threaten the status quo, the social boundaries of the established religion, their sense of national identity, and their hopes of miraculous healings in Nazareth. No wonder they tried to force Jesus over a cliff. But Jesus' message is for us well. Are we willing to hear the unexpected?

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus speaks about the coming Kingdom of God, when all things on earth will be made new, when the lion will lie down with the lamb, when we shall all extend our love to the stranger, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the neighbor we've never meet. God's Kingdom will be filled, the Gospel of Matthew suggests, with those who have fed the hungry,

given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and supported those in prison.

But while we see glimpses of the promised Kingdom of God, we shouldn't be too quick to talk about Jesus' hometown folk as if we are more insightful. Certainly the reaction of the people of Nazareth, to try kill Jesus, was disproportionate to what Jesus had said, But to say that Muslims or the homeless or the refugees fleeing to save their lives should be excluded from our country because they are not one of us, or might be dangerous, or followers of Islam, is disproportionate and not unlike what the people of Nazareth were thinking. It is certainly not proclaiming, by word and example, the Good News of God in Christ.

In our baptism, which is central to the formation of our lives and work as followers of Christ, we subscribed to, and have subsequently reconfirmed, that we will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; will seek and serve Christ in all persons, strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. But how does this pledge become realized in our lives? How is such a promise translated into action? That's where God's calling comes into play. God calls each of us into some form of ministry.

God's call to us may come directly from God. But more likely God's call to us of how we should serve will come through others. Refugees had always been an abstract concept for me, until I met Fr. Johnson, who led me on a trip to Turkey and Iraq where I saw refugees face to face, saw them as people desperately seeking help. When you see hunger and desperation in the face of children, notions of ethnicity and religion and safety fade away.

Unlike being selected to be on a team in grade school, God's work has openings for everyone. We each are called to do something to help others and ready the world for the promised kingdom of God. Amen.

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January 31, 2016