

St. Mark Lutheran Church Service
August 21, 2022
“**Living our Calling**”
Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD

Readings

First Reading Jeremiah 1:4-10

“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,” declares the Lord. (Jer. 1:8)

Psalms Psalm 7:1-6

“Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. (Ps 7:3)

Second Reading Heb 12:19-29

“Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.” (Heb. 12:28).

Gospel Luke 13:10-17

“When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”” (Luke 13:12)

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

God summons us to *live our calling* by acting on the love we experience from our heavenly Father. Like Jeremiah, every child of God is commissioned to fulfill a vocation by following our Creator’s call. Human flourishing **is** *living our calling*. The Lord gives his reassuring presence to us so that we can live well as we uproot, build and plant.

*“But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’ You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.” (Jeremiah 4:7). **PRAY***

I. Introduction: Do overs or Game over?

“I want a do-over!” is a phrase that I heard this summer. Playing with grandkids is not all fun and games. There are protests, rule clarifications, outright whining and

yes, demands for do-overs. In a game, when kids discover that they've made a disastrous move, they want a do-over before its "game over." Maybe there is something to this childish demand for a do-over.

Is there a recent experience that you would like to "do over"? Are there conversations from this past week that you would like to rewrite?" Was there a care strategy that did not pan out that you would be grateful to erase and go at again? Was there a person wronged or silence when there was a window to bless? Is there one to whom you would like to restore to closeness?

Pastor Brehm invited me to take services this weekend. Fortunately, I had already noted that this Jeremiah passage was in the lectionary readings. This happens to be one of the first passage that I preached on way back when I was a lowly youth director in a small-town church. Dare I say that was forty years ago? Lord, I am grateful to have the opportunity for this sermon 'do-over' and the bring a deeper understanding gained over the years. Doing ministry has enhanced my appreciation for this beautiful and memorable text on being called to serve.

What does it mean to live out our faith in our callings?

My intention is to follow the lead of Gene Edward Veith, a Luther scholar who oft explores the theology of vocation.

“For Martin Luther, vocation is nothing less than the locus of the Christian life. God works in and through vocation, but he does so by calling human beings to work in their vocations. In Jesus Christ, Who bore our sins and gives us new life in His resurrection, God saves us for eternal life. But in the meantime, He places us in our temporal life where we grow in faith and holiness. In our various callings — as spouse, parent, church member, citizen, and worker — we are to live out our faith.

Veith in Martin Luther on Vocation and Serving our Neighbors,

Veith holds to this premise: God is hidden in vocation. Christ is hidden in our neighbors. These phrases will help us reflect on how to live out our calling in doing our vocation in service of our neighbors.

Our sermon lesson builds on the Scripture describing Jeremiah's call. In a second movement, the message connects to how Jesus displays his own calling by caring, doing, healing and speaking to further his Kingdom. The theological theme underlying this message will become evident: clarifying our vocational call to

service is vital for living that calling to love neighbor as we love self. Christ followers strive to better live our calling so that there are fewer cries for do-overs before its game over.

II. A Calling from Conception to Consecration and Commission

The prophet Jeremiah is depicted as the “weeping prophet.” His message was a penetrating and unrelenting demand to repent. He preached plainly and unapologetically about sin. His ministry was to all of Israel and at points, to other nations. Yet, his primary ministry was in and around Jerusalem. This meant that he was a prophet among his own people because he himself came from a priestly line. On one hand it would seem that Jeremiah was preaching to the choir. This could not be further from the truth. The Lord’s perspective and the viewpoint of his Israelite leaders/people were vastly discrepant.

Jeremiah’s audience was convinced that they were God’s chosen people. As such, they were invulnerable to his judgment. Nothing seriously bad could befall the descendants of those who were freed from slavery in Egypt and ushered into the promised land. His hearers felt entitled to blessing. The Lord’s favor was a divine birthright. They rejected Jeremiah’s threats of the Lord’s displeasure. Jeremiah had the unrewarding honor of holding up a mirror to point out sin, injustice, cruelty, audacity, and the core faulty assumption that no one is above condemnation and correction. Jeremiah creatively found ways to bring drama to his message using actions over words to make his intentions clear. Jeremiah did not bring tidings of good news. Instead, he stirred up a foreboding tension of coming destruction and exile. More than once, Jeremiah resigned his prophetic office and hung up his prophet’s hat. He agonized over the prosperity of the wicked while he and other victims of injustice suffered miserably. The difficulty of his mission and the blind resistance to his message make the occasion of his calling a sacred moment to examine for it did sustain him for the long haul.

Let’s zero in on three lessons drawn from Jeremiah’s call, consecration and commission.

- 1) “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.” (v. 5)

The Lord had his eye on Jeremiah *before* his birth. His coming into the world was no accident or surprise entrance. God pictured Jeremiah with intention and purpose even before his body was fully formed or his voice became mature enough to preach. This is a unique comfort message that we should all take to heart.

Like Jeremiah, the psalmist says that as you and I were knit together in our mother's womb, God knew us and loved us (Ps 139:13-14). Take note. The bible represents the life development process as continuous from conception to heavenly transition. The whole person may not be fully formed in the womb but all the components for who they will become are entirely in place. The progress of human development is underway. Hear this reminder. The Lord knows and welcomes you. This was true when you were but an embryo, a child, a young person, and mature adult. It will be true even when the body itself begins to show serious signs of wear and tear. As you were formed in the womb and however you enter his heavenly presence, the Lord knows you and loves you.

2) “But Lord, I don't know how to speak; I am too young” (v. 6)

Jeremiah did not feel equipped, prepared, gifted, wired, fitted or worthy of the calling that the Lord placed on his life. His protest of the charge to preach is bluntly transparent but it only reflects a partial truth. Agreed, Jeremiah is not ready or able to fulfill this calling. That is the exactly the point. Fulfilling one's calling is a joint venture between the Holy Spirit and our whole being.

A calling is divine-human partnership: God calls; the called one responds and, a service dyad is launched. Our talents, qualities, quirks and accumulated experience do not provide us all that we need to live our calling. Self-sufficiency is myth. Here is the Bible's answer to the human realization that we are not ready or worthy: “Fear not, for I am with you and will rescue you.” A Biblical calling is essentially an invitation to accept his salvation and partner for life with the Lord to do his bidding.

When you sense yourself being overwhelmed by the demands of the day or the difficulty of the decision, here is how to soothe your fear. Remind yourself of the partnership you have with the Lord who will remain with you, rescue you, and empower you to do his good work.

3) “I have put my words in your mouth.” (v. 9)

Jeremiah is gifted with a beautiful image of the Lord touching his mouth and thereby consecrating him for service. It is no accident that the mouth is the body part that is set aside for the Lord's work. James has it right when he writes:

“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by human beings, but no one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. (Jas 3:7–10.)

Jeremiah is commissioned to say demanding things to people who do not want to listen. God supplied Jeremiah’s words and managed his tongue. When we have to speak into frustrating conversations, here is how we might appropriate this truth via prayer: “Lord, put your words in my mouth and your love for others in my heart that I might best represent you.”

This remarkable passage records Jeremiah’s calling from conception to consecration to commission. You are not Jeremiah and thankfully, are not likely to face the intense opposition that lay before him. Nevertheless, there are those around us who believe themselves to be invulnerable and carry a sense of entitlement in ways that are similar to the neighbors, family, citizens and fellow clergy who Jeremiah faced back in his day. The pattern and prescription for ministry to those around us remains the same: recollect your beginnings, rehearse your confession of faith and baptismal vows, repeat the promises made at your confirmation, and remain on task to fulfill your commission to serve the Lord.

III. To Heal or Not to Heal: The Sabbath Conundrum

The Gospel reading for this Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost finds Jesus teaching in the synagogue (Luke 13:10-17). He is in a place of honor. As Rabbi for the Day, he plainly fulfills his mission by expanding the people’s understanding of the Word of God. A drama plays out before his eyes and he enters in to teach us about living one’s vocation. A woman who has been afflicted due to demonic influence and a physical ailment stands before him in all of her humiliating, ugly and disabling deformity. The expectations of those around Jesus, the religious elite, included strict rules about what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. Jesus teaches here more by doing than speaking. He refuses to look past the suffering and torment of the child of God before him. Defiantly, he places his hands on her to straighten her wrangled and twisted body. “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.”

Jesus, like Jeremiah before him, holds up a mirror before those who consider themselves to be his peers, maybe even his superiors. Jesus corrects their misguided reasoning for the synagogue leaders about what it means to be faithful. Faithful living is not about rule keeping but neighbor serving. Ending suffering

when it is within your power reflects the will of our compassionate heavenly Father; no matter what the calendar says about the day of the week.

In this miracle and reteaching of the synagogue leaders, Jesus models the calling, consecration, and commission that is given to Jeremiah. He faithfully lives into his mission to care for those in need even when that means setting aside deeply entrenched human expectations.

IV. Our Calling, Consecration and Commission

A key theological theme underlies this great passage from Jeremiah. The Lord's offer of salvation comes with cleansing and a commission. How different is the calling, consecration and commission of Jeremiah from our experience? At first glance, it may appear that there is no comparison. Most of us cannot claim to have spoken directly with God like Isaiah or Jeremiah. Further, such a special summons and sending must be reserved for those who are set apart for professional ministry such as apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, missionaries or seminary professors.

Let's get this right. This is a Lutheran fellowship. In our Reformation tradition, it is not feasible to artificially separate the calling model for ministerial leaders from the call to us as everyday believers. Yes, those who are ordained are set apart by a local congregation for leadership. Protestant tradition holds to the notion of the priesthood of *all* believers. The Holy Spirit's call to our hearts is to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Our new birth summons continues as a call to become an active participant in the fellowship of the church (body of Christ). Finally, the Christ follower is commissioned to serve our neighbors, anyone who is near our side, together with our Lord.

An ordinary conversation starter might be to inquire: What do you do? The answer for the sake of simplicity is to answer with our occupation: a minister, psychologist, sanitation worker, business person, farmer, etc. The modern mistake to confuse occupation with vocation. One's occupation is our trade, how we make a living, and perhaps how we interact with neighbors and civil authority. Vocation is not a synonym for occupation. Our mainstream and humanistic culture still employs the language of "calling" but there is a kink. The contemporary image of finding a call is to look within. Call clarification is an introspective process to find your passion and follow your heart. This is the stuff of thousands of popular stories. This mutation of "calling" is not all bad; but it misses the certain Gospel fact that the restlessness in our hearts is not for better self-expression or greater social acceptance. The unease in our soul is to enter into a divine-human

partnership. This is the essence of our calling. Our heavenly Father calls and we respond as child. A Lutheran understanding of vocation is this: God’s liberating call is to serve the neighbor in all areas of life.

The use of the word vocation as a synonym for occupation undermines the deeper and wider implications of a Lutheran understanding of vocation—God’s liberating call to serve the neighbor in all areas of life. (R. Carter, 2020 in Lutheran Forum)

In this framework, our occupation is what we do to meet our economic needs; a vocation is how we serve the Lord in the ordinary and real moments of life as we care for spouse, children, family, friends, co-workers, acquaintances, and even strangers in need both near and far.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said this: It is not more vacation we need - it is more vocation. As we are given the opportunity to greet each new day as if it were a do over, we pray for freedom to lean on God’s support and to step into service that makes a difference in those around us. In short, by grace we have been saved by faith. God does not need our works to gift us our salvation; yet our neighbors need our works to experience God’s blessing. This explains the phrase “God is hidden in our vocation. Christ is hidden in our neighbor. Whatever we do for the least of these, we do for him.

V. A Ministry Lesson: A Message Do Over

It is actually wonderful to have this opportunity to “do over” my early message on Jeremiah’s call. In seminary, it was never my expectation that I would preach or be a senior pastor. I wanted to do pastoral care or being a youth pastor for all my days. It is a good thing that there is no recording of my first attempt to preach this passage from Jeremiah. My recollection may be dusty, but it would be fair to say that it had more problems than merely being ragged around the edges. Something happened following that service.

A senior couple introduced themselves and invited our family to dinner after the service. As I preached more regularly and eventually took on interim preaching, those dinner invitations became more frequent. Rev. & Mrs. Hiltley were godly folks who gave their lives to ministry. Rev. Hiltley hardly ever earned a salary as a church pastor. He practiced an itinerant, tent-maker style of ministry. That is, he held day jobs so that he could fulfill his real job. When this dear couple entered our lives, his struggle with Parkinson’s disease was already advanced. He recognized that his preaching days were behind him. How would his vocation continue? Well,

he took on this amateur and provided kind, yet firm critique with a fair dose of encouragement. Make no mistake, Mrs. Hiltzley was not shy about offering her perspective. As this occurred, they loved on our family.

One day I took a call from the local funeral director. This was odd for the Senior Pastor handled that important function. As it turned out, Mrs. Hiltzley's sister had passed suddenly due to blood clot after a fall. That service was my first funeral. As the years progressed, our kids took to referring to Grandma & Grandpa Hiltzley. These servants of the Lord became an extra set of local grandparents. My ministry went through a tough season in that small-town church for reasons that are not part of this story. For myself, I can testify that I remain in my vocation today with memories of the kindness and faithfulness of those dear saints. God was not hidden but evident in their ministry. Christ was glorified as he cared for us. The Hiltzleys lived their vocation.

Their son was a fine pastor in another state. They were on good terms but as lived apart for the sake of his calling. It was not a surprise when I received the request to speak at the homegoing service for Mrs. Hiltzley. It was an honor to share how this couple had lived their vocation by obeying the Lord and serving others.

VI. Application

When the Lord nudges you to step into a commission that feels like it is too much, do not keep repeating: "But Lord, I am too young and I don't know how to speak." You may automatically offer your favorite roadblock. But instead of resisting and missing opportunities, lean into the partnership formed by the Holy Spirit. Pray for cleansing and the strength to proceed. Pray like this: Lord, show me how and let's do this together.