

4 Epiphany – 31 January 2010 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Jeremiah 1:4-10 • Psalm 71:1-6 • I Corinthians 13:1-13 • Luke 4:21-30 • Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany • January 31, 2010 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

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

I'll begin this morning the same way the bishop did when he was here a week and a half ago: "these are three great lessons." Unlike the bishop, however, who set aside two of the lessons and preached eloquently on the gospel only, I am going to work with all of it. Each of today's lessons has a point to make about where we are at St. Thomas Church on this Annual Meeting Sunday and on the precipice of a very important Dartmouth Board of Trustees meeting.

Our words from the prophet Jeremiah are also offered as a choice for the Old Testament reading at ordinations to the diaconate. This same lesson was read at my ordination in Peterborough, a year and a half ago. For such occasions, it is a perfect *lesson*, in all meanings of that word, because like Jeremiah at the beginning of his ministry, a person who is newly entering ordained ministry needs to hear that ordination doesn't come with all the answers. As we practice trusting God, we discover that we become less anxious when life continues to come to us on a need to know basis.

We don't know what's going to happen in two week's time, or even later today. But God calls each of us—to something—and we can choose to step up and answer the call or we can be too timid to act and do nothing from the sidelines.

Our reading from Jeremiah also gives us permission to believe that we don't have to get it right the first time and that it's all right to feel unsure. The awareness that one has of being called, with a sense of some kind of mission, is a great mystery. God knows our potential and has already given each of us marvelous gifts for the common good. God may call us suddenly in a big way or we may feel ourselves gradually drawn in a particular direction. The words “being called” and “having a sense of mission” are phrases that apply to more than just ordained ministry. We are all part of the same body and the body only fully works when all parts are working. We make a mistake, I think, when we believe that we voluntarily choose to come together to make up the body of Christ. Rather, we are part of an organic whole that includes all people, of which this gathered community is only one piece of the body. Like Jeremiah, we are all gifted and called by God to use our gifts. We may be afraid and feel most unworthy; we may be afraid and feel too busy; we may be afraid and overwhelmed into paralysis with the enormity of taking Step One.

Jeremiah already had what he needed and when he answered God's call, God gave him the strength and courage to use his gifts. We who are Christ's body in this place collectively have all the gifts we need to carry out God's mission in this place.

Frederick Buechner famously said, "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you most need to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." [from *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner] Your particular gift is where your talents and passion intersect. Do you like reading to your children or grandchildren? There's a place for you at Tots & Tea. Do you enjoy singing? There's a seat for you in the choir. Do you enjoy learning? There are several different opportunities here each month. At our Annual Meeting following this service, you can hear about and see evidence of the working of this part of the body of Christ. We look back at 2009 to see where we have been so that we can look forward to where God is calling us together in 2010.

What is Step One in answering God's call? It's being willing. Jeremiah was afraid and unsure. *And* he accepted the touch of God's presence and trusted that God would indeed be with him. But Jeremiah's call came with a *caveat*. It will not be easy.

Plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing were not going to win Jeremiah any popularity contests. But all those things would happen to Israel before there could be building and planting. I dare say that when we are in the midst of destruction—whether that means a natural disaster, an unwanted diagnosis, the unraveling of a marriage, or the unraveling of our finances—it is all too easy to say, “I just can’t do it.” God’s answer is, I believe, the same to you and me as the answer given to Jeremiah: “Do not be afraid.” This is a message we need to hear and embrace.

We don’t know much about Jesus’ sense of call. We do know that he didn’t have an easy time living it out. Jesus lived several hundred years after Jeremiah, and his divine message was still an uneasy fit. As Jesus concluded his reading of Isaiah in the synagogue, “all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.” [Lk 4.22] When Jesus explained, however, that his message proclaiming the Lord’s favor actually meant “all welcome—no exceptions” all in the synagogue were filled with rage—so much so that they tried to hurl Jesus over a cliff.

One commentary likened Jesus’ message in the synagogue that day to the dove that was released from Noah’s ark. Jesus released his message of kindness and justice in that room and the vision of compassion has been circling around the globe ever since, looking for a place to land. The sayings are still difficult to speak and to hear.

“They imply rearranging personal values and questioning public priorities.” [Ray Waddle in

*Disciplines 2010*, pg. 42] We don’t know what Jesus felt when the people reacted so strongly

against him that they drove him out of the synagogue and led him to the brink of a cliff.

We are only told that “he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” [Lk 4.30]

Jesus embraced Step One, being willing to be called to God’s mission. He was gifted with eloquent and challenging speech and appeared to enjoy using it. He was not waylaid by the feelings, insults or violence of others. He moved through their chaos of emotion and kept going on the path that was God’s path for him.

Lastly, as we look at the Epistle reading, I would like to remind us all that there is always a danger when we look at the scriptures because reading two thousand year old texts require some interpretation. Most of the time regarding interpretation, people come down on one of two sides, either interpreting scripture literally or metaphorically.

Either/or debates are rarely productive and tend to descend rapidly into trying to outdo the other side and show the other side in a bad light. There are certain biblical passages that people focus on in a debate about biblical literalism. I Corinthians 13 is not one of those passages. In my experience, more than any other passage, this one is chosen equally often for both weddings and funerals. We aspire to it and we honor people who work toward its ideal.

What would the world look like if all Christians *did* take this chapter literally? [Ray Waddell, *Disciplines*, pg. 41] In all seriousness, I tell you that this week I timed how long it takes to read I Corinthians 13—about two minutes. I considered reading it five or six times and calling that my sermon for today. If we could accept the advice in this chapter and seriously try it on, might we not change the world?

Christ's way was a way of love. We are the body of Christ. You make the connection. In the first step, we open the door to the mystery of being willing to answer God's call--to you--to serve the common good with your unique gifts. The mystery will continue: The way will not be an easy one, but the rest of the body acting in love, with Christ at the head, will be traveling with you. You will not be alone. Do not be afraid. Amen.