

"Considering Our Call"

Jeremiah 1:4-10 & Luke 4:21-30

January 28, 2007

Before I begin this morning I would like to take a minute to say thanks to all of those who steps in to help in special ways during my recent absence for continuing education and vacation time. I know that there were many who stepped up for a variety of tasks and I could not begin to name everyone but since it is sermon time I do want to say thanks to both Desiree' and Pastor Bruce Anderson for their leadership in worship on the last two Sundays. For me, worship and preaching have long been such important tasks, it is comforting to know that those tasks are in such very capable hands when I am away.

It is great to be back with you for worship. There is something really comfortable about being surrounded by your own church family. At least, that is my experience. You are my church family with all of your special warmth and wonderfulness. And also with all of your uniqueness with all of your quirks. With all of who and what you are, you are my church family and I love you [well, most of the time] and it feels good to be 'home' after being gone for a couple of weeks. It is so unfortunate that everyone is not able to say the same thing.

Let me explain that last comment. Not everyone feels at home in their home church and for increasing numbers of people the church is not a place that holds many warm feelings or even any interest. The seminar that I attended at Luther Seminary two weeks ago focused on our calling in the congregation. Several speakers emphasized the fact that the importance of the church in our society has changed dramatically. One speaker put up a graphic with a picture of the 50 united states. Forty-nine of the states were colored blue and only one was colored red [Hawaii]. The speaker said that it was not a political map but a church map indicating the states where the churches were losing members. And yet, even though in 49 of the 50 states the overall number of church attenders is down [not just ELCA but taking all churches into account], we were also told that there is a growing number of Americans who say that they are 'spiritual' but not religious. Eighty percent of Americans say that they want a 'spiritual life' but the church really has nothing to do with it [and the vast majority of that 80% have nothing to do with a church congregation. Did you know that here in North Dakota - God's country - the heart of America - the heart of the most 'churched' people in the country did you know that here on an average Sunday morning, only 29% of us are in church [it sounds even worse when you think of it in the reverse - that means that 71% are not in church]. In Washington state the number is 14% 86 % are not in church. And if you look at even more statistics, the picture gets even more grim. If you look

at a break down by age, the percentage of people who do not attend is twice as high among young people age 18 - 24 as it is among those who are 65 and over.

For me, it is every so nice to be home - to be worshipping with my church family. And it makes me so sad to know that it is not true for everyone. And why isn't it? That is a question that we in the church must face and struggle with. We have such good news to share. We are really pretty good people to be around. And people do have a need to belong to a family like the church. Why isn't it working?

The seminar speakers talked of many different factors. Many things came down to the fact that the world is changing around us - new mods of communication have changed what works for people, a changing cultures has made a once very comfortable setting virtually obsolete and uncomfortable - music that once drew people close to God now turns many off. It was really amazing to hear one speaker share a statistic that said that 8 out of 10 people report that they do not feel as though they have entered into the presence of God at worship - - 5 out of 10 say that they have not sensed the presence of God in worship in the last 6 months. Why?

Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism with the Holy Spirit hovering over Him in the form of a dove and the booming voice of God proclaiming Him as His beloved son. From that powerful spiritual moment, Jesus was driven out into the wilderness where He face great temptation. In the few brief lines that follow His temptation and precede our text today it is clear that Jesus goes around from town to town, church to church, preaching and performing miracles. Everyone seems to be thrilled and amazed. But then He comes home and something happens. There, among His church family - there among His hometown folk, He feels rejection and anger. The congregation does not feel the presence of God - only disappointment. They expected so much more and were ready to run Him out of town. They were in the very presence of God and did not know it. They were so set in their expectations that they could not see past them to simply welcome the savior. I have tried to imagine the scene - imagine what they had in their grasp as they led Jesus toward the 'brow of the hill' where they planned to throw Him off - but He simply passed through the midst of them and "went on His way." I don't know how significant it is, but the text does not say that He went away simply that He went on His way - He continued with His mission of salvation. The Scriptures are clear about the fact that Jesus does not abandon us even in those moments when we do not recognize that the Savior is present.

Why is it that we too often do not see or feel the presence of our Savior even when we come together in His house? Why is it that so many people long to have a fulfilling spiritual life but can not find it in the church and stop looking for it there? Why is it that everyone does not feel to comfort of being at home among their church family? The answers to such questions are probably more elusive then trying to answer why Jesus' home town folk rejected Him.

The Apostle Paul writes so beautifully in our second lesson - they are words that seem almost out of place anywhere except at a wedding. But they are words for all occasions - words for the church at all times - words for congregations as, across the United States, we struggle to try to be the body of Christ that we have been called to be. Bound up in faith in an almighty God we look forward, move forward with hope. And surrounding everything we do, shaping every decision, every action, filling every person and flowing from one person to the next and the next and the next - informing all that we do is love, for God is love.

AMEN