

**Sunday Service at 10:30 AM
Streamed LIVE on Facebook.**

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Summer 2020 Worship Theme: Vocation at the Crossroads

“Calling All Reluctant Servants”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur GA

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 5, 2020

Rev. Dr. James Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures Jeremiah 1:4-10; Hebrews 11:1-3, 29-35, 39-40

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Hebrews 11:1-3, 29-35, 39-40

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace. And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Good morning, fellow reluctant servants of God.
Today Jesus Christ finds us together, here at the crossroads.
All around us and within us is a Great Awakening.
There is a heightened awareness in the air,
a fresh wind blowing across the face of the waters,
a Spirit of Truth and Love and Hope setting us ablaze.

Are you like me, finding this all so ironic,
that while we are quarantining, sequestered,
isolated for health's sake,
doing our best to quell the spread of the coronavirus,
we discern that God's Spirit is calling us
to see one another with fresh insights,
to love one another as children of God,
to break down the barriers and walls that divide,
to dismantle systems that oppress or regress or suppress
any single soul from living fully into beauty.

Here we are, keeping social distance and wearing masks
yet society has a rare, amazing opportunity to draw ever closer,
to remove the masks behind which we hide our true selves.
Our new normal might be, could be, should be
newer than we ever dreamed, imagined, envisioned.
If we put on the brakes and seek to go backwards
to the way it was before,
we will have missed the opportunity of a lifetime,
of a new life together.

Keep hope alive.
Let's take a chance; take a risk; be brave, audacious, hopeful.
Draw closer to God.
Closer to one another.
Closer to whom God is calling you to be.

This morning we are going to explore our personal call, our vocations,
and then, led by biblical witnesses,
explore greater, wider, prophetic expressions
of God's call to social responsibility.

We start by examining our *vocare*, our calling, our vocation:

***"The place God calls you to
is the place where your deep gladness***

and the world's deep hunger meet.” – Frederick Buechner

“The place God calls you to...”

Call – an invitation from the Holy to embody your meaning and mission.

Each and every call is unique; no two are exactly alike.

We think we are formed by a cookie cutter,

that we should be like someone else, or even everyone else.

In fact, we are hand-molded, individually wrapped, uniquely designed.

God's fingerprints are all over your soul.

“...the place where your deep gladness...”

What makes you truly glad?

What makes you deeply happy when you do or participate in this?

“...the world's deep hunger...”

What deep hunger or hungers do you see in the world?

What concern are you thinking of when you say,

“Someone should do something about that?”

“...the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”

The crossroads where these two intersect, there you discover your vocation.

That is where God is calling you to do, to be, to go.

Everyone has a vocation.

God empowers you to live and breathe

at the intersection of personal gladness and service above self.

Regardless of whether you are at the morning, afternoon, or twilight years of your life,

God is continually beckoning you into embodying your call.

Your vocation may be full-time or part-time.

It may be your daily life or a hobby or a rare, occasional, special experience.

Be careful.

Be aware.

Be forewarned.

There is a warning label on this invitation to serve.

Beware that if you only seek after that which makes you glad

and make no attempt to serve the greater good,

your life may become empty,

lacking in depth, fulfillment, and meaning.

Be aware that if you only practice addressing the hungers you see

and have no joy, no gladness, no thrill or happiness in the effort,

then you run the risk of burn out & depression,

and may feel as if your efforts are in vain.

Be honest.

Ever have a school teacher who did not like teaching?

Yes?! Did you learn anything?

Is anyone healed by a physician who doesn't want to be a doctor,

doesn't like people, enjoy healing and helping?
Is a soul transformed by a preacher
who wishes he or she were not in the pastorate?

Follow your joy and seek to make a difference.
Be flexible.
Your vocation may evolve and shift and change over time.
Be like new clay in the hands of the Potter.
Be open to be shaped and reshaped as the Lord has need of you.

Talk about changing vocations:
At 18, your pastor went to clown school,
 juggled for spare coins on the streets of Boston,
 performed in a circus,
 toured *The I Don't Believe It Players*,
 shaped balloon sculptures for kids from coast to coast,
 and then...and then ran away from the circus
 to join the Church of Jesus Christ.

At 25, a spark began to glow
 to serve God's people in congregations and their community.
That spark remains aglow and aflame to this day,
 and shall for as far as I can see.

As Rev. Anna Strickland said on our 601 Wednesday live check-in,
 she can't separate her personal call to love
 from her social call to serve God's people.
 They met at the crossroad and are forever intertwined.
The Bible has a lot to say about this,
 and the Word agrees with her.
 Or, is it she embodying the Word?

The Holy Scriptures are theological documentation of God's loving activity.
Ever notice in the Holy Bible
 how God doesn't ask anyone to be great -- and doesn't have to --
 because God is already great.

God's Big Love is all the greatness the world will ever need.
Rather than ask anyone to be great,
 God invites, compels, asks only for us to be faithful,
 "to be merciful, to do justice, to walk humbly with your God."

The Holy Bible is replete with the stories and songs,
 prayers and praises of people's faith experiences.

Hannah describes how she met God in the Temple...!
Peter preaches about a God who forgave him...!

Bartimaeus says I was blind but now I see...!
The Gerasene Demoniac says I was lost but now am found...!
Lazarus says I was once dead to the world, and now I live in Christ...!

The foundational conviction of our vocation
is that we are called, made with a purpose, and sent.

The time to serve is now;
the place is wherever God sends you to love.
Yet, how often do we allow ourselves to be dissuaded,
to give up or give in too easily,
put ourselves down,
count ourselves out.

Right when the world needs you and me so deeply,
when it hungers and calls out for mercy, mercy, Lord, have mercy upon us,
do we say, oh, I am not worthy.

I'm not good enough.

I'm kinda busy right now.

I'm not skilled.

I'm single.

I'm married.

I'm divorced.

I'm afraid I'm too hurt.

I'm afraid I'm too happy.

I'm afraid.

Or any number of reasons we create
for why we can't or won't or don't
answer Jesus' knock at the door or the Spirit in the dark.

Jesus knocks on my door all the time
and has yet to make an appointment.

Hear the Good News!

You are not alone in your fear and trembling, in your trepidation and hesitation.
If you weren't trembling or nervous,
someone might think you were numb or already dead.

(If I wore sandals when I preached, you'd see my toes wiggling from nerves.)

The Holy Bible is replete with story after story of human transformation,
stories that touch us to the quick,
stories that sound just like our own.

They touch us because we can see our self
in the failures and feats of our spiritual ancestors,
our spiritual predecessors who stumbled and bumbled
and clawed and crawled their way in and out
of life's deepest challenges,
and then, with the help of God,

our forebearers survived and thrived to embody their faith.
Reluctant Servants of God,
all of us with checkered pasts went on to faithfully serve the Lord,
we have lots of company.

Adam passed the buck
Noah got drunk
Gideon, Jeremiah and Timothy were all too young
Sarah was too old
Abraham was even older
Isaac was a daydreamer
Jacob was a cheater
Joseph was abused, misused, and used
Moses was a stutterer
Samson was a womanizer
Rahab was a prostitute
David was an adulterer and a murderer
Jonah ran from God, twice
Peter denied Christ, thrice
Matthew was a tax collector
Martha was a worrier
Zacchaeus was too small
Nicodemus was too literal
When Jesus needed them the most,
his disciples slept
Before he was Paul,
Saul persecuted Christians...for a living
and Lazarus, well,
Lazarus was dead!

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but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned.
By faith the walls of Jericho fell
after they had been encircled for seven days.
By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient,
because she had received the spies in peace.
And what more should I say?
For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah,
of David and Samuel and the prophets
— who through faith conquered kingdoms,
administered justice, obtained promises,
shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire,
escaped the edge of the sword,
won strength out of weakness,
became mighty in war,
put foreign armies to flight.*

*Women received their dead by resurrection.
Others were tortured, refusing to accept release,
in order to obtain a better resurrection.*

We are blessed by God to live in a resurrection drenched world.
I've heard people say otherwise.
I'm sure you have too, that this season we live in is cursed,
not a season of resurrection and hope but an apocalypse, an end of times.
So many are in despair.
A Rabbi once said, *"The only unforgivable sin is despair,
because despair denies God."*

Despair denies.
Hope affirms.
You know, in the Bible an apocalypse is a gift,
for it ushers in a new, great awakening of hope.
See an apocalypse as an unveiling,
when illusions are exposed,
when we come face-to-face with truth.
Let us lift our veils
as we walk together into a new normal,
greatly awakened,
heeding the call to love,
building a civil society,
creating the Beloved Community.

President Obama urges all to remember the words of Dr. Martin Luther King:
"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice."

*"The reason we support civil society
is because we have seen in this country of ours that it does,
in fact, bend toward justice.
But it does not do so on its own.
It does so because there are hands of ordinary people
doing extraordinary things every single day
and they pull that arc in the direction of justice.
That's why we have freedom in this country."*

The moral arc of the universe
is made up of people,
people like you and me answering God's call to serve,
to live into and to live out their vocation,
"where cross the crowded ways of life."

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!