

“Privilege of Call”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
February 1st, 2015 ©
4th Sun. after Epiphany

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Mark 1:21-28

‘And they were astonished at [Jesus’] teaching,

for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.’

Mark 1:22

Let us pray... O God,

Strengthen those us who seek to serve you and your good purpose.

Don’t let us let you down. In Jesus’ name we pray...

Amen

Last week’s scriptures were about ‘the call’ to serve God;

The fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John, immediately

dropped what they were doing to follow Jesus,

while Jonah tried to run away from God’s call.

This week’s lessons are about the *privilege* of ‘the call’ –

that those who serve God in a particular role also assume a responsibility

to be true to that call – that is to say, not to misrepresent God.

‘Whoever you are and wherever you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here’
implies that anyone can serve God in some way.

But not everybody is suited to the role of leadership in a church –

whether that is ordained minister, church professional, or lay leaders.

There are responsibilities and there are also dangers.

Leadership in a church is a privilege, not a right.

In today’s scripture lessons, Moses warns against false prophets

and even though the demon-possessed man

acknowledges Christ as the Son of God, Jesus won’t let him speak.

In his Sermon on The Mount – found in Matthew Chapter 7,

Jesus warned about those who misuse their privilege,

which I have paraphrased in this way...

‘BEWARE OF THE FALSE PROPHETS

WHO COME TO YOU IN SHEEP’S CLOTHING,

BUT INSIDE ARE RAVENOUS WOLVES.

YOU WILL KNOW THEM BY THE OUTCOMES THEY PRODUCE.

YOU DON’T GET GRAPES FROM THORNS AND THISTLES...’

He goes on, and then to say...

‘NOT ALL WHO SAY TO ME, ‘LORD! LORD!’

WILL ENTER THE BELOVED COMMUNITY OF HEAVEN.

IT WILL ONLY BE THOSE WHO DO THE WILL

OF MY HEAVENLY GUARDIAN – WHICH IS SIMPLY... TO LOVE.’

The operative word is ‘love’...

The Willard, p.2

Love is the litmus test by which we know how to appropriately judge others and judge ourselves.

Love is the compass by which we can accurately correct ourselves and get back on track.

As a minister, I hear this as a warning, but also a challenge to check myself out.

At this point, let me clarify and say I could not be prouder of all of our lay leaders who have demonstrated to me that they lead with their hearts and minds.

By the way, Nancy Bell is working on a liturgical drama called, "Is It I?" based on the disciples' response to Jesus' declaration at the Last Supper – that one of his disciples would betray him.

Ultimately, they all let him down in some way, until they were reunited with Christ after the resurrection, when he renewed them for the task of sharing the Good News.

It is important to question your call, whether that is for ordained or lay ministry – not to the point of being morbid about it, but to be open to correction in order to stay on course.

I heard a statistic recently that 50% of seminarians who enter pastoral ministry leave ministry completely before they have served 5 years.

Upon graduation from seminary, I knew I was not ready for pastoral ministry, but without question, I knew art would always be part of my call.

So, I devoted myself to develop my skills in art and storytelling as a way of doing and teaching faith expression.

Those eight years after seminary – before I was ordained, proved to be an important time of preparation when I worked in youth ministry, taught in private and public schools, as well as work with adult psychiatric patients in a state hospital.

A kind word goes a long way, and I remember the 2nd Floor ward nurse at 50 Ellis, for whom I had great respect, Lee Moore, Mrs. Moore who said to me after my first week working at Greystone Park State Psychiatric Hospital, "Drew, I like how you talk to the patients."

About a year later, she said, "Drew, you ever think about going into the ministry?"

Thanks to her as well as others, like my youth minister, Lori Witmer Roberts, and Lancaster classmates Al & Angelee Benner-Smith, who would periodically invite me to preach and tell Bible stories at their churches, I stayed involved in ministry.

Meanwhile, I continued to work on my art – illustration, drawing, community theatre, and translating the Bible stories I would tell.

Willard, p.3

One time, I entered a talent show in downtown Plainfield, NJ
at The Strand movie theatre, which was full of young people,
and as you entered in the dark, there were these huge speakers,
with a relentless, booming percussion.

I followed a rock band and got out there on stage
and told the story of Moses and the Parting of the Sea –
but I was getting catcalls like, “Hey Jimmy Swaggart! Get off the stage!”
I was just able to get through the story, but later realized I had forgotten a line –
‘And the LORD hardened their hearts’...

The leader of the rock band came up to me afterwards and said,
“Hey, man. I’m a Christian and I appreciate what you tried to do!”
The next week at the elementary school where I worked as a substitute teacher,
a little girl said to me, “Are you the man who was telling stories at The Strand?”
I said, “Yeah, I guess those kids didn’t want to hear my story”
and she said, “I was telling them to be quiet,
because I wanted to hear what you had to say.”

It was important to hear those affirmations, but I began to question
why I even wanted to tell Bible stories – why was I going to all this trouble?
With some extra money I made by leading an after school art program
for elementary schoolchildren, I flew out to Washington state
to go to the Grunewald Guild – a Christian artist conference center.
The program for each week of the summer that year,
focused on a period of Church history –
I went for the week dedicated to the Middle Ages,
which featured classes on calligraphy, stained-glass window making,
and storytelling.

The instructor for storytelling happened to be a UCC minister named
Roger Robbennolt who would begin and end his presentations, saying,
“And the Storyteller M’butu said that when you tell a story,
you must make a sacred space...
And the Storyteller said that when you tell a story,
you must light a fire in the hope that the meaning of your story
will burn itself into the hearts of your listeners!”
Then, he would light a candle as he began to speak...

Roger told us stories of his life as an impoverished and abused child
raised in the backwoods of Michigan.
We were riveted by his tales of struggle and triumph
as he was guided through childhood by his Aunt Gletha as his only ally.
He would begin and end his stories with this ritual of lighting the candle,
to bring us into the story and take us out again,

Willard, p.4

Roger also told us that one time he had been asked by a community college to do a presentation as part of an afternoon cultural series for the college students – on Friday afternoons.

Needless to say, the students were not kind to anyone sent to ‘babysit’ them hours before the beginning of the weekend.

Knowing this, Roger went early to the theatre and told the support staff he wanted the everything turned off except for the aisle lights – he wanted those students stumbling into their seats, and he had only the floor lamps on the stage turned on so there would be shadows, saying,

“I want a lot of company with me onstage!”

He began his story concert on time – and finished 5 minutes early!
He got a standing ovation!

I realized Roger Robbennolt had given me the tool I needed to grow as a storyteller and as a worship leader.

He had taught me that the use of ritual is to prepare a sacred space for people to feel safe to enter – and to take them back out again, renewed to re-enter the world.

For each of us, it is different how we turn off our self-consciousness to get quiet inside, in order to receive what God has to say to us, Sunday to Sunday.

The principles for storytelling apply to worship, too.

Not long after this I got a call from my youth minister, Loretta Roberts, who was serving a church in the Reading-area.

She asked me if I would lead a storytelling workshop for the teenagers at the annual meeting of the South Eastern Association of the PA Conference.

I was also warned these youth were notorious for being rough on anyone they perceived as being sent to ‘babysit’ them while the adults had their business meeting upstairs...

I walked in, holding a lit candle and reciting the words of Roger Robbennolt – and I had their attention!

I told the story, then explained to them how I would teach the story to them, getting them to repeat line by line, next to practice by themselves with a copy, and taking turns telling it to each other.

Finally, I asked for volunteers, and only one of them dared to do it – which is big, because teenagers don’t want to fail in front of their peers.

Willard, p.5

The tables had turned and I had finally arrived at a level of mastery for ministry,
to be entrusted with creating a sacred space for people to feel safe
and share a sacred part of themselves.

Friends, that is at the heart of our shared concern about how we keep
our balance as a welcoming congregation that values reverence, too,
making room for each other while making room for God.

I closed that storytelling workshop with those young people
like I have been privileged to do, telling Bible stories
for more than 20 years since,
adapting Roger Robbennolt's ritual to say this:

“And the Storyteller said that when you tell a story,
you must make a sacred space,
because when someone has taken the time to learn a story,
it comes from a sacred space inside of them
and should be received in the same way.

And the Storyteller said that when you tell a story,
you must light a fire in the hope that the meaning of your story
will burn itself into the hearts of your listeners!”

Amen

Our lesson today from Deuteronomy 18:15-20, begins with Moses speaking to the Israelites in the wilderness about a future 'prophet'. There would be many prophets who would come to guide the people of Israel like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Elijah; But for us as Christians, this would also mean Jesus...

[Moses said,]

[15] The Lord your God will raise up a prophet like me from your community, from your fellow Israelites. He's the one you must listen to.

[16] That's exactly what you requested from the Lord your God at Horeb, on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'I can't listen to the Lord my God's voice anymore or look at this great fire any longer. I don't want to die!'

[17] The Lord said to me:

'What they've said is right.

[18] I'll raise up a prophet for them from among their fellow Israelites—one just like you.

I'll put my words in his mouth,

and he will tell them everything I command him.

[19] I myself will hold accountable anyone who doesn't listen to my words, which that prophet will speak in my name.

[20] However, any prophet who arrogantly speaks a word in my name that I haven't commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet must die.'

Mark 1:21-28

- [21] And they went into Caper'na-um; and immediately on the sabbath
[Jesus] entered the synagogue and taught.
- [22] And they were astonished at his teaching,
for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.
- [23] And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit;
[24] and he cried out,
“What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?
Have you come to destroy us?
I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”
- [25] But Jesus rebuked him, saying,
“Be silent, and come out of him!”
- [26] And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice,
came out of him.
- [27] And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying,
“What is this? A new teaching!
With authority he commands even the unclean spirits,
and they obey him.”
- [28] And at once his fame spread everywhere –
throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.