

Love and Justice

By Steven Chambers

January 30, 2010
4th Sunday after Epiphany
Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10
I Corinthians 13: 1- 13
Luke 4: 21-30

Chalmers United Church
Kingston, Ontario

What does it mean to be called by God? What is the experience like? Who is called – what do they do – what does it mean?

In the United Church of Canada, we standing in the reformation tradition, with the notion that all people of faith are ‘called’ in some way. We subscribe to the theological principle - ‘the priesthood of all believers.’ The recent Statement of Faith of the United Church put it this way:

We are each given particular gifts of the Spirit.
For the sake of the world,
 God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry.
In the church,
 some are called to specific ministries of leadership,
 both lay and ordered;
 some witness to the good news;
 some uphold the art of worship;
 some comfort the grieving and guide the wandering;
 some build up the community of wisdom;
 some stand with the oppressed and work for justice.
To embody God’s love in the world,
 the work of the church requires the ministry and discipleship
 of all believers.¹

Now, not everyone in the United Church would agree that they are ‘called by God’ – some might see it that way, but others wouldn’t. That’s OK. We respond and we participate in different ways. The experience of being touched and called by God runs deep in our faith tradition and it can be downright difficult. Jeremiah is a good case in point. God sends forth God’s hand and touches Jeremiah’s mouth. That may sound like an intimate, caressing kind of touch. But, in fact, the verb in the original language can also mean *strike* or *harm*. In the Book of Job, the same verb appears in the context of Satan challenging God to test Job’s faithfulness. There is nothing gentle about that episode. So, along these lines, we might think of the ‘touch’ of God to the lips of Jeremiah more in terms of a ‘jolt’ or a ‘shock’. The call to be a prophet was not easy or simple. Long before Jeremiah, the people of Israel – terrified by the sight of God’s fiery presence at Sinai – had asked for prophets to protect them and to speak God’s word to them. They got Moses and many others – each with the demanding task of standing between a somewhat erstwhile people and the strong presence of God. It is not safe to be a prophet. It is not something that people might really want to do. So, would the ‘call

¹ “Song of Faith” A Statement of Faith of The United Church of Canada (2006)

of God' be of interest to people today? We are not accustomed to the sharp physical visual image - God put out God's hand and touched Jeremiah on the mouth: "I have put my words in your mouth." It is powerful, it is potentially dangerous, it is astounding. God selects this youthful Jeremiah to destroy what must be destroyed, to bring to life what is waiting to be born.

Another youthful one, feeling a 'touch' from God, went home, ended up in the synagogue and, was handed the scroll of Isaiah. He read prophetic words, words that sounded so good to the people – at first. How could these words not stir a community up with new excitement and energy?

The spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Luke 4: 18-19

Who would not be pleased to hear such news of liberation, of new vision, of hope? The reading of this scroll would have been a reminder of the people's strong hope in the faithfulness of God. For a people who had been oppressed themselves, who had been captives at one time, for a people who had a strong sense of being chosen by God, this word would have been deeply meaningful. It would have reminded them of a much larger story, a story grounded in the Exodus from Egypt and reframed in the return from exile in Babylon. For these people, hearing Jesus – the home town boy - read this great proclamation would have done their hearts good. Everyone, says Luke, spoke well of him.

At least briefly. Was he giving them a history lesson, or was he inviting them, calling them? Sometimes the home town advantage doesn't stretch very far on its own. In what seems like just a moment, public opinion starts to shift. Jesus knows that there is something just beneath the surface; there is conflict brewing. Perhaps he wants to elevate the creative tension. He picks up the pace. He speculates that even though people respond well to this reading, they will likely want him to perform some kind of sign or miracle in addition – word had obviously been getting around of some fancy miracle work. But Jesus is not interested in miracle-baiting. He refuses. Provocatively, he goes elsewhere in the history of Israel to recall two healing moments that have a critical edge to them. The first reference is to Elijah who, during a famine in Israel, was sent to stay with a widow who was not an Israelite but a Gentile. There were many widows in Israel but they were not chosen for his visit and this healing; the Gentile was. The second reference is to all the people who were afflicted with leprosy in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha. "None of them" was healed by Elisha; the only person healed was a Syrian called Naaman. Jesus is hitting rather close to home now. If you recall your history, he says, God didn't exclusively look after Israel. God, in fact, has compassion for people outside of Israel. God just very well may be expanding the call.

Jesus is redefining the chosen people of God. He honours the people's rituals and their history – through his synagogue visit, his reading from scripture and his recognition of the Sabbath. In spite of his home town reputation, and his honouring of these rituals and places, he is provocatively throwing the door wide open. God

has made a covenant with Israel; it is indeed unique and special, but Jesus is now bringing a new lens to that relationship. The loving compassion of God is not just for Israel; it is there for others. God's love has no boundaries. This is an enormous affront to the people. Their sense of themselves as the sole participants in God's great enterprise was challenged. Confronted by one of their own, they get angry. Tension builds quickly. A mob scene emerges; Jesus is physically removed from the synagogue and the city. At the brow of a hill outside the city, Jesus is about to be thrown head-long over a cliff. But – and here is the miracle moment in Luke's story – he slips away through the midst of the crowd "and went on his way."

He spoke to them of the great love of God for all – and it just about got him killed. It isn't easy to respond to God's call.

Paul was not a home town boy of Corinth, the cosmopolitan city in Greece, but he had a special relationship with people there. He had traveled there to carry the message of the Gospel and in some ways he was known to them. When it comes time to confront, Paul does not hesitate. When it comes time to focus on the difficult things, the controversies and the conflicts, the disputes over who is to be worshipped and who isn't, over who has the most important gift and whose are secondary, Paul doesn't hesitate. He goes to the source, the core of all disputes and any possible reconciliation: he goes to love.

If we can only understand love, we can understand God. This is not some sappy Valentine card. God is at once the source of love, love incarnate and the power of love: the essence, the embodying and the enlivening of love. There are some fine points here – important translation points about the many kinds of love - but as Paul Tillich suggests all the finer points are important in different contexts but what "justifies the translation of them all by 'love'; ... is the urge toward the union of the separated."² If God's relationship to the world is so often summed up as "God so loved the world that God gave God's only son", if Jesus invariable seems to speak about the limitless welcome and hospitality and embrace and forgiveness of God – all things of love – then God must be inherently comprised of love.

God is not only constitutionally love, but also love in action. Israel knew this in its history. We know it in so many ways in our lives too. Paul urges the people of Corinth to find their source in that great powerful love of God; to model their lives on it. And in so doing, love will come to characterize what *they* are about. In Corinth, the community evidently has become separated from one another, they are not so much a community as they are a gathering of individuals in conflict most of the time. Love is difficult, says Paul, for we are human. It requires patience, kindness, no envy, no arrogance; it requires truth-telling. Oh yeah. Now it all comes very close to home, doesn't it? *Love never ends*, Paul writes. Sometimes, in the world we know, it is not hard to believe that love has come to an end. In the images we see on television, in the actions of some, we might despair over love. But, according to one deeply called, love never ends.

The power of the call. It is dangerous, especially when it rests on love. It is like an electric shock, a jolt to the system. The call to individuals, goes beyond them, to confront

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 3 (University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp.137

the systems in which the individuals find themselves. That's what Jeremiah found, and Moses too. That was the liberating word from Jesus in the synagogue that day. That's how Paul transformed love: it goes beyond the personal to the community itself. John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, in their study of Paul, suggest that

...people like Jesus and Paul were not executed for saying, "Love one another." They were killed because their understanding of love meant more than being compassionate toward individuals, although it did include that. It also meant standing against the domination systems that ruled their world, and collaborating with the Spirit in the creation of a new way of life that stood in contrast to the normalcy of the wisdom of the world. Love and justice go together. Justice without love can be brutal, and love without justice can be banal. Love is the heart of justice, and justice is the social form of love." ³

This may be the clearest call to us, the meaning that we can consider for our lives. Love is both compassion and care, it is also determination to seek justice. For the young university student and others who inspired last Friday night's Benefit Concert for Haiti, it was not just to raise funds for relief, it was also to raise awareness and deep concern.

The people of God had received love beyond measure but there was more to experience and to know. So prophets like Jeremiah were called – and so many others too. It was hard work to speak and act the word of transforming love. So Jesus, not wanting to show them a miracle, was a miracle. He walked right through the middle of their anger, right away from the edge of the cliff where he might have perished, and he went on his way. And he became love ... for us all. Calling us as well to be love for the world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

³ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Paul* (Harper One, 2009 p. 205.