

**Sermon "Who is Calling?"**  
**Kirk of St James**  
**Sunday February 2, 2025**  
**Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

Whenever I am working through difficult issues, I often turn to one particular friend to chat. She is always incredibly wise, and I often leave the conversation feeling much better than when I started. I am not the only person to find this, a lot of my friends do the same. I was wondering why her conversations are always so helpful, and I believe it is because she asks you questions. Working through the questions helps you to talk through a great deal of the inner dialogue that tends to weigh us down. She helps you discern your answer simply through the questions she asks.

Today in Jeremiah we deal with the topics of calling and discernment--tough concepts in today's modern world. Several years ago, now I told you about a unique tradition the Quakers have within their denomination called "clearness committees" to help. These committees are available to any member who is struggling for clarity regarding a call, issue of discernment, or even major life change like marriage. The intent of these committees is multifaceted.

First it demonstrates that none of us are alone, and that none of us have to go through life and its challenges without support. Secondly, the committee aims to help you attain clarity in a difficult situation. Before you meet with the committee you meet with a focus person, who records a brief synopsis of the matter that you are seeking help with. Then the committee is made up of half a dozen people whom you choose from among friends, colleagues, mentors, and even strangers--whomever you request to be gathered. The session begins with a period of silence "the silence is a gracious confession that discernment is a mysterious process, and absolute clarity is more an ideal than a real attainment...After the silence, the rules are so simple they are radical: ask only questions! No advice, no storytelling, no windy narratives, no problem solving, no challenging. Simply pose questions in a spirit of caring..." In the end the goal of the committee is not to dispense advice, or play devil's advocate, the goal is simply to listen. In doing so it allows space for the person answering to hear what they are verbalizing.

To this day I often wonder what it would be like to attend one because the clearness committee is unique. It is designed to help people search their heart and their lives, with the help of a community.

A call, or change in our lives is never easy, Jeremiah knew that as well as anyone. When we open our first scripture reading today, we hear God's call directly to Jeremiah, but he doubts it, and he fears. He tells God "You have the wrong man for this job, I don't know how to speak, and I am simply too young to do this." While God could simply dismiss these fears, or move on to the next person, he chooses instead to listen. God hears Jeremiahs fears, and then he seeks to both reassure him, and also encourage him.

We know as readers that Jeremiah will go on to do great things. He will help guide his people through the downfall of Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple. We know that he will be a mighty prophet, and great leader. Jeremiah, however, does not know any of this yet. All he knows, is that he is a young man, whose life has been turned upside down. In many ways we may think he is lucky. We only wish that God would be that clear in our own lives. Jeremiah is so obviously called we do not even imagine we are in the same league as him. As one writer said one of the challenges we are presented with, when we look at the call of Jermiah, is it tempts us to think of calling or vocation as something reserved for great figures of religious history--prophets, evangelists, and missionaries, but the truth of the matter is that God calls every Christian to live the radical gospel of Christ. As one of my professors once preached:

" Today I would like to begin with a simple proclamation: we are called people.

And to claim that calling is to claim an extraordinary thing. Because God is at work in the world and our own hands are necessary to that work, what was once seen as ordinary, becomes extraordinary, or as another writer put it: "Whether those hands are diapering an infant, assembling an automobile or balancing a corporate account, or leading a congregation, they are God's hands, claimed by God at baptism for the accomplishment of God's will on earth." Our calling may not come in the same way it came to a Moses or a Jeremiah, but we are called. It is the basic identity of who we are. Jesus' first words to the disciples were: "Come and follow me" and later, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." Whether you want to speak in terms of being called or being sent or being appointed, it is the DNA of who we are."

We are called. In our Presbyterian statement of faith called Living Faith we affirm this call. It reads " We are called to work out the meaning of our own lives and to find our true vocation in the love

and service of God. We serve and love God by the service and love of creation especially the care of the needy. Every kind of work that is honest and serves others is a vocation from the Lord. Calling means the necessity to deny selfish ambition and desire in order to minister to others. In God's service true freedom is to be found." Each and every person--man, woman and child is called without exception.

Our response may be "That is fine for other people, but I have never heard the call of God in my life." Or "Other people may be called, but I am not spiritual enough, or perfect enough...and I am sure you have your own blank you can fill in here." That is the honest human response. Jeremiah certainly reacts that way, and God was talking directly to him at the time. "The prophet Jeremiah speaks to something many of us know we do not choose God; God somehow mysteriously and even against our will chooses us." In all of our failures, struggles and challenges God still finds us and calls us. The beauty of the Presbyterian statement of faith is found in its simplicity. Every kind of work that is honest and serves other is a vocation from God.

Two of biggest challenges I always face when talking about call are the personal nature of call, and the ambiguity. None of the prophets or leaders in the Bible were called the exact same way. Each was different, sometimes God spoke through others for example when David was anointed King through Samuel. Moses met God in a burning bush, and Mary and Joseph were visited by an angel. Calling or vocation (whatever you like to call it) is unique to the person, time and place. We too have been called in a specific time and place, to the people of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, and the wider world.

The other struggle is that likely for most of us, we never have the burning bush moment. Most of the time our discernment is based more on what our gut is telling us, what circumstances keep leading us too, and a combination of other events. It is the thought we cannot shake, an idea that strikes us, you try to ignore it but again and again it returns to you. Calls are scary because they often mean change, or a new way of doing things. Often, we would be justified in feeling that we are not up to the task. I have shared this before, but the closest experience I have had when it comes to feeling called was when I went to work in Ukraine. I was very uncertain and reluctant to leave my job, so I said, "If my boss agrees to take me back when I return, I will go." I really did not think she would, but when I told

her what I was thinking she told me to have fun. Then I thought well, I cannot just go to Ukraine, I need an actual position. So, I e-mailed national office and asked if they needed anyone. They said "sure, can you start in two weeks?" Then I said "well, I only have \$1000 dollars saved up, so I will need a round-trip plane ticket for that amount or less." I contacted a flight agent who had one sitting in my inbox the next day. I left two weeks later. That is one of the closet moments I can come to call in my life, and it wasn't direct, it wasn't clear, and it wasn't easy, it just seemed like all the signs pointed to yes, and there comes a moment when we have to trust in that process.

You may have experienced this process in diverse ways. You hear from someone you were thinking about. You pick up a book that changes your life. You begin a conversation and suddenly you find yourself in the middle of something brand new. I cannot articulate your call, but please, please, please know and believe that each of you are called in your own unique way. Some helpful advice that was once shared with me and was immensely helpful comes from Greg Levoy who said, "Our callings--whether they are vocations in the arenas of work, relationship, lifestyle or service. They may be calls to do something, or calls to be something (more creative, less judgemental, more loving, less fearful). They may be calls toward something or away from something; calls to change something, review our commitment to it, or back to it in an entirely new way; calls toward whatever we've dared and double-dared ourselves to do for as long as we can remember." We are able to say no but, my general experience is that God keeps working at us in the hopes that eventually we have the courage to say yes.

I am going to close today with a few thoughts from retired Episcopal priest George Martin, "As baptized Christians no one can identify us by what we wear. Our faith is evidenced by what we do and what we say. Our call to serve the God who shadows us is to speak a word of truth in daily life. We are asked to respect the dignity of every human being. Hardest of all, and easily the riskiest road we dare, the road that seeks justice and counters evils, letting the face of Christ emerge in love of neighbour. Sometimes we must even speak a word of judgement or just say no. This calling will never be easy if it is the calling of God. To do these things is to recognize those holy moments and touches of grace that really do plant and build up." May our hands and hearts and voices bring grace and mercy and more anything else be done through God's love for the world.