

“Leaving a Residue of Love”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Jeremiah 1:4-10; I Corinthians 13; Luke 4:21-30

Richard E. Otty
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I recall taking what I think was called the Strong Vocational Interest Inventory, a series of questions that gave the result of what career it thought might fit you. I believe one option for me was to become a conductor. I don't think the inventory had the career of prophet as one of its options. And I don't think I have ever heard someone say, “I feel called to be a prophet.”

While we may use the adjective “prophetic” about someone, the noun is usually archived for those who lived long ago and have books published in the Bible with their names. They remain a bit of a mystery, and so I think we often gloss over the fact that just about every prophet and even a number of leaders in Israel tried to find a way out of their call.

Jeremiah was no different. He heard God's call, and faced with speaking unpopular truth to his own people, Jeremiah resists. I'm too young and ill-equipped. God simply says, “Don't tell me you can't be my prophet.” Let us hear Jeremiah's call to be a prophet in 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.’

[Then, I Corinthians 13 responsive reading in bulletin]

What would Hallmark cards do without the “love” of I Corinthians 13 for its wedding and anniversary cards? What few notice is the chapter lacks any reference to God, much less Jesus, thus allowing the cards to be marketed beyond those in the Christian community.

In fact, I Corinthians 13 is not a love letter at all. It is more a manual of discipline for a church with serious divisions between members. It is Paul's response to those divisions, so when he defines love as being patient and kind, we know he is writing to those who have been impatient and unkind to each other.

Our Gospel lesson is a continuation of last week's lesson in which we learned Jesus was growing in popularity in the region and amazed those in his hometown synagogue – at least at first. Today's lesson shows how words and speech can turn an adoring crowd into a vicious mob. We recall from last week, Jesus is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and chooses to read:

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 favor.

This was a well-known text for the people of Israel. It was God's promise of the Messiah, for whom they had waited for centuries. So, when Jesus says, *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*, the people would hear this as, *Your/our long wait is over! It is Messiah time.*

While that might seem scandalous, it was not this announcement, but something Jesus says in what followed, that turns the worshipers who were amazed at Jesus into a murderous mob bent on his murder. Let's listen for what might have set them off, in Luke 4:21-30:

²¹*Then Jesus began to say to [those in his hometown, Nazareth synagogue], "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* ²²*All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"*

²³*Jesus then said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."*

²⁸*When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove Jesus out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.*

The rage seems to erupt all at once, and what began as a favorite son love-fest planning a potluck, becomes a mob planning a lynching. I use the term lynching cautiously, understanding its history in this country, where racial hatred was allowed to prevail, with the law often turning its head. The intent of lynchings was to kill a body, but also to leave a residue of fear and intimidation in a community. Today, we call that terror.

By residue, I think of the ash that spews from a volcano and lands everywhere, or the pollen that fills the air in the Spring, sticking to car windshields, or the black dust that settled on our window sills when living near a coal mine prep plant in Southwestern Pennsylvania. The intent of terror was and is to leave a residue of fear and intimidation that would stick with people, and affect their daily lives and actions.

Yet, in light of terror, what always amazes me are those bold enough to stand in the face of fear and intimidation. Whether it was those involved with the civil rights movement of our own country, or those who today speak truth to power in Egypt, or Syria, or those who offer medical care for all on the front lines of undeclared wars, people are putting their lives on the line to expose terror and speak and act truth.

Speaking God's truth was both a prophet's call, and a cause for resisting that call. God sets aside Jeremiah's objections, *Don't say you are just a boy*. God was not seeking to debate Jeremiah's abilities. God was saying, I am calling you because I have chosen you, set you apart, appointed you for a special work. I will give you the words you need to speak truth, hard truth, my truth, to your own people.

Now the call of God is a funny thing. It is easy to speak of it in terms of clergy being called to ministry, or even church officers, or prophets, for it keeps the call within the confines of faith. We sometimes venture into extending the idea of God's call to the secular arena, but it is usually in terms of professional vocations as doctor, nurse, lawyer, teacher, engineer, accountant. I expect those who hire at Starbucks rarely if ever hear someone say, "God has called and gifted me to be a coffee barista;" or for someone hiring at Walmart to have someone say, "I feel called to be a Walmart associate." That is the danger; that our sense of call is only focused on profession, for it then becomes a bit of exclusive club.

To help us set aside this sense of exclusivity, James Calvin Davis, a Middlebury College professor and member of Albany Presbytery of which I was previously a member, writes of the call of prophets like Jeremiah as those sent into "... the cultural wilderness, testifying to God's intentions for the world in the way we live our lives." [Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 290] It seems to be a daunting, overwhelming task, reserved for the few, the chosen, the articulate, the brave.

Yet, as in John Calvin Davis' quote on the cover, Jeremiah is the biblical prophet who allows us to democratize God's call. He is the prophet most viewed as representing each of us, the common woman or man, partly because the excuses he offers are so much like our own – feelings of inadequacy, being ill-equipped, too young, fearful of offending.

If we take Jeremiah's call as a reminder God can and does call each one of us, we begin to move away from call as being "vocational," in terms of what we are paid to do or what gives us status. If as with Jeremiah, God knows, and indeed has implanted gifts within us we may not yet recognize, our call is no longer figuring out how God seeks to use us based on our past achievement or our current confidence. Instead, our sense of call begins with believing God has gifted each of us for a work where we can speak God's truth in word or deed or both.

In a congregation I served as an associate pastor, my area of responsibility included mission and social outreach. At one point, I compiled a list of all the ways church members could be involved in the church, and in church supported community organizations such as food pantries, meals on wheels, tutoring. Along the way, it dawned on me there was a gap in my list. I had not included scout leaders and youth sports coaches, class mothers and fathers, and volunteers at the community center. Where more important to have someone carry the love and truth of God than as a coach of a youth sports team? I'm not talking about proselytizing for Jesus, but the call to be the presence of Christ's love within the culture.

This is where “call” becomes universal, not professional. Each one of us is daily called to be a presence for God’s intentions for the world, testifying of such by words and actions of truth, love, and ethics. In a hurting world, a world over which God grieves, we are called to be present to and stand by the hurting, the lonely, the dispossessed, the refugee, the hungry, the widow.

The stories of two widows seems to be what ignited the furor in Jesus’ hometown synagogue. Jesus said something that really ticked off the crowd, and most agree it is contained in those confusing words about Elijah’s widow of Zarephath, and Elisha’s healing of Naaman the Syrian. Rather than retell the biblical stories behind those words, let me suggest what caused the anger is that Jesus told folks what they thought was all theirs might not be theirs at all; and if it was theirs, it was not theirs alone – it would have to be shared with Gentiles, non-Jews.

Quite simply, Jesus is announcing he has come, not just for those who had been expecting and were ready for the Messiah, but for all people. He also said he was not there to grant favors to his hometown buddies. His brought a message of inclusion his friends could not accept. One could easily hear them saying, “Forget the marginalized, give your healing and blessing to us first, and if there are leftovers, give them to others.”

A part of me wondered about this in terms of a new pastor coming to PCIS to serve “us.” That is a danger, as each church member wants her or his desires and needs met, before even those with deeper needs, much less those Gentiles who are not even a part of the community! There’s likely a whole sermon in that, so I will just leave you hanging with that.

Paul’s concern in writing to the divisive church in Corinth is their competition among each other. Their impatience and unkindness, their boasting and arrogance, was contrary to the way the church was to model behavior to the world. Paul reminded them they had a greater calling, and love was to be at the core of their life together, and their living in the culture.

If the intent of terror is to leave a residue of fear and intimidation, then I hear Paul suggesting love is the residue the faithful are to sprinkle within the world. He writes prophecy will come to an end, tongues will cease, knowledge will fade; then, when all becomes clear, what remains will be a residue of faith, hope, and love.

Just as lynchings and other acts of terror not only kill, but have a goal of leaving a residue of fear and intimidation to silence truth, so we can easily allow the subtle intimidations of inability or unworthiness to make excuses or even convince us God is not calling us. To the high school student and the eighty year old; to the one unhappy with her or his current work and the recent retiree; to young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile, God will say to us what God said to Jeremiah, “Don’t tell me you have no call.”

“Don’t tell me you have no call. As I gave Jeremiah words to both tear down and build up, so I have placed within you my truth to speak and my love to live. I have gifted each one of you to spread a residue of faith, hope, and love, [and when you do] you will be teaching the world, the greatest of these is love.”