There’s a story my old preacher used to tell, I think he said he had come across some version of it in the writings of Harvey Cox. It takes place during the early days of the American Civil Rights movement, when any African American protestors in the South risked immediate and violent backlash – often from the very law enforcement officers who were supposed to protect them. On this particular night, three men had been rounded up and thrown into the town jail, where they sat – not knowing what they were supposed to have done wrong – and not knowing if they’d survive the night. They had heard stories about the things that happened in this jail – at the hands of the local sheriff. And he was there that night – what you’d have to call a stereotypical southern sheriff – with his belly hanging over his belt, a toothpick in his mouth, and a grin on his face. He stood there at the bars of the jail cell, watching the prisoners and laughing about what was likely to happen next. +++ That’s when a local Baptist minister showed up and asked to see the prisoners. At first, the sheriff didn’t want to let him in – didn’t want to acknowledge that these second-class citizens deserved to have a visitor – but, as a church-goer himself, he finally relented. He let the minister into the cell, but then followed him in so he could hear every word that was said – he wanted to make sure everyone remembered who was in charge here – who made the rules… +++ After a few minutes the minister reached into his coat pocket and brought out a small communion set. He started with a little plate of torn pieces of bread scattered across it – he said a prayer over the bread passed it to the closest African American prisoner – then the plate was passed through the whole group of prisoners – and finally it made its way to the last person left in the room – who looked at the plate of bread – the body of Christ – and hesitated. He just froze, standing there holding the plate, staring at the bread … Then, slowly, the sheriff took a piece and put it in his mouth, and passed the plate back to the minister. He also took a little plastic cup of juice and eagerly drank it down without a word. +++++++ Early the next morning, the sheriff was nowhere to be seen – but the duty officer said he had orders to release the prisoners – and they were free to return to their families. +++ Now, I don’t know what happened in that town in the following months and years – maybe things got better – maybe they didn’t. But that night… there was a moment of reconciliation at a most unexpected time, brought about by the body and blood of Christ. That night, someone remembered that they are a child of God – Known by the Lord – Claimed by Christ – and Called to be more… more than a racist sheriff bullying other people into submission. +++ +++

Last week we talked about how we receive the Word of God – remember Ezra reading the Torah to the People of God, who wept because it had not been read to them for 70 years – before most of them had even been born. And Christ coming to the Temple in his hometown of Nazareth – where he read the words of the Prophet Isaiah and declared this scripture to be “fulfilled in your hearing” it. We found that the power of Scripture isn’t simply in the fact that it exists… or that it sits on your shelf, ready to dispense authoritative rules for how to live your life. +++ NO, the Word of God is powerful when we encounter it – alive – with the Holy Spirit. And we agreed to listen… for how it teaches us to live… how it teaches us to love… and what it calls us to do. +++ Well, this week we need to continue that conversation – this week the rubber hits the road, as they say – because it’s time to really think about living into Christ’s claim on our lives, making love the center of everything we do, and hearing God’s call to serve. ++++++++ When I was a youngster in Sunday School – or listening to sermons during church, which took place just after Sunday School – I think the stories that had the greatest impact on me were the ones about the early Christian martyrs – the ones who would refuse to publicly renounce their faith in Christ, even though it meant they would be tortured and killed… As a child – the way people talked about it – it seemed likely that I was going to be faced with this choice one day. Would I be ready? Would I have the courage to stand up for Christ even if it means certain death? +++ Now, on my top level of thinking I convinced myself I would have the courage – I must – or else, I thought, my faith meant nothing… But on the next level down – where fear dwells – I knew I wouldn’t. And so I managed to rationalize my eventual failure: – “What good would it do for me to die, anyway – when I could just lie one time about being a Christian and then live to do good works for the rest of my life.” +++ Over the years I was relieved to discover that, in fact, this was not a choice I was likely to be faced with. +++ I would have the luxury of sticking with that top-level answer: “Of course I’d have the courage,” with the growing certainty it would never be put to the test.
+++ Now, I know, that’s an extreme example – but aren’t we really faced with this kind of choice all the time? +++ We hear God’s call through the Word – whether it’s in Scripture – proclaimed from the pulpit – brought out through Christian witness – or a burden laid directly on our hearts by the Holy Spirit: we hear the God who knows us, who claims us in baptism… calling us to be more – and to do the work of Christ. +++ And on one level, we say – “Yeah, bring it on – send ME!” But, below that, where fear and reluctance dwell – we’re not so sure. And we manage to rationalize it: “It’s just not appropriate to talk about Christ in public… I’ve got so many other things on my plate… I’m not good enough at that – I’m sure someone else would do it better.” +++ You know what I mean – we’ve all done it… +++ That’s why I think the most compelling part of the story of the sheriff, standing in that prison cell, with the communion plate coming his way… the most compelling part is:: What was going through his mind during that moment of hesitation? I think he was rationalizing – trying to find a reason not to take it – “That preacher didn’t come to see me anyway… I’ve got to keep my authority here, can’t show weakness…” But beneath that – on another level – he knew otherwise, Christ woke him up and said “I know you, I claim you, I call you – Don’t refuse my body and blood.” +++

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Jeremiah has got to be the best example we have of God saying this to someone in the Bible – the best, but one of many. When the Word of the Lord came to him in today’s reading, Jeremiah had no desire to be a prophet: he thought he was too young, he was afraid, he didn’t want to become an “enemy of the people.” Even after he begins the work – he resents being a prophet while actually doing it. But one thing we’ve already learned by the time we reach Jeremiah, is that God doesn’t take “No” for an answer. I mean, Jeremiah is in good company: Moses had tried to get out of being sent to free Israel from slavery: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? I don’t even know your name, Lord! What if they don’t believe me or listen to me? But I’m not an eloquent speaker – I can’t do what you’re asking.” +++ And the great prophet Isaiah initially resists his call:: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” +++ Does this all sound too familiar?: “I can’t – I’m not good enough. I’m broken. I don’t have the skills. I’m too young. I’m too old.” +++ But the Holy Spirit gives us what we need: The Lord reaches out and touches Jeremiah’s lips, giving him the words to say, along with a boldness he never had before. God reminds Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Jeremiah is KNOWN and CLAIMED by God before he is ever CALLED to prophecy.:: Moses is given power to fulfill his mission and a voice that Pharaoh cannot ignore; and an angel touches Isaiah on the lips with a live burning ember to ordain and empower his prophetic work. +++ And the Holy Spirit does the same thing for us… for you. There is a meme – or a saying – that’s been floating around social media lately that really gets at the core of this:: “God does not call the equipped – God equips the called.”” It’s a reflection of the claim in Ephesians that Presbyterians quote in ordination services: “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.”

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So… where do we start? I think Paul makes that pretty clear in today’s Epistle reading:: Love – agape love – like the love God has for us all – is at the center of Christ’s call on our lives. We are so used to this passage being used at weddings, which makes a positive statement about what love IS:: “Love is patient, love is kind,” that we often miss that the passage is more about what love IS NOT:: it is NOT envious, boastful, arrogant, or rude. It does NOT insist on its own way. It is NOT irritable or resentful. It does NOT rejoice in wrongdoing… ++++++ Paul is writing to the church in Corinth – a church with so much potential to do God’s work – like this church also has so much potential to do God’s work – like ours, it was a church full of people who are KNOWN and CLAIMED by God – but CALLED to be more – to be better. The church in Corinth reflects the economic diversity of the city, with members who are very rich, very poor, and everything in between. This is leading to divisions – their unity is threatened by envy, boastfulness, arrogance, rudeness, and a lack of respect among themselves. – So, Paul is telling them LOVE is job #1 – love among themselves – then love for the rest of the world.

Today’s Gospel reading is a hard one – but it also reflects how God’s People must listen – and understand – that Christ calls us to serve beyond where we might expect – beyond our comfort zone. Everything was fine as long as the people of Nazareth could “Ooh and Aah” over their local boy who turned out well – and that’s all they want to do. They want Jesus for themselves. Luke writes, “All spokes well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that
came from his mouth. They said, ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ They want to see some of those miraculous healings they’ve been hearing about – do some for the local crowd. But, as always, Jesus is quick to dispatch to that idea. His ministry isn’t to honor them. It’s for the whole world. So, he reminds them, there were lots of widows in Israel in the time of Elijah – but when there was a drought and famine, Elijah went to help a widow in Zarephath in Sidon – NOT in Israel. And, there were plenty of lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha, but Elisha cleansed a Syrian. So don’t count on Jesus treating you special just because you’re Nazareth. They get so mad, they try to kill Jesus by throwing him off a cliff. +++ Just as Paul tells the Corinthians to follow Christ they must love – Jesus tells Nazareth they have to drop what’s comfortable – let go of preconceptions – and follow where he leads. +++ Drop what’s comfortable – like a privileged white sheriff in a mid-century southern town, taking communion in a jail cell with four Black men. +++ Drop preconceptions like the musings of a child that life will go on just fine – easy – until the unlikely day that we’re asked to deny Christ or die – musings that give way to an adult realization that Christ – who Knows us – and Claims us as his own – also Calls us to follow him – to serve him – to BE his voice in unexpected, and sometimes uncomfortable, places – in ways that will surprise us – and will bless the world with his love. +++ +++ “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; +++ and the greatest of these is love.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.