

TAKING A CALL IN CHURCH

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-13

Scene: A small bench is set up at the front where a parishioner is seated. The organ begins playing the first verse of “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!” The parishioner stands up holding a hymn book as the organ begins to play and starts singing on the last two lines.

Parishioner: “Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty! God in three persons, blessed Trinity.” (Closes hymnal and pretends to pass the peace to others around him) The peace of Christ be with you. Thank you. (Turns to another) Yes, and also with you. I’m glad to meet you. (Turns to a third person) The peace of Christ be with you. Yes, that is a beautiful hymn.

(Sits down and pretends to listen as the service continues)

(CELL PHONE RINGS)

(He fumbles around to get it out of his pocket, while apologizing to those around him.)

Parishioner (to those sitting beside him): I’m sorry. I thought it had it turned off. (Presses some buttons) There, now I am sure it is turned off.

(CELL PHONE RINGS AGAIN)

Parishioner: Oh for heaven’s sake. (Opens it pushes some buttons and turns to others) I promise I’ve got it turned off this time.

(CELL PHONE RINGS AGAIN)

Parishioner: What the? (To others) I am so sorry. Excuse me. (He stands up, leaves pew, and crosses over to the other side of the chancel where he talks on the phone.)

Parishioner (in a hushed voice): This is not a good time to call. I’m in the middle of church.

(The Lord answers over the sanctuary speakers)

Lord: When is a better time to call?

Parishioner: Any time. But don’t interrupt me in church.

Lord: Isn’t that the point of church?

Parishioner: What do you mean?

Lord: Isn’t the point of church for me to interrupt your life and talk to you?

Parishioner: Who is this?

Lord: Whom do you think it is?

Parishioner: If you are some telemarketer I think you should hang up right now. We are in the middle of church, singing hymns.

Lord: I know. Your singing was so heartfelt, I thought I should respond.

Parishioner: Who are you?

Lord: Think about it. Who could call you in church, even if your cell phone was off?

Parishioner (suddenly nervous and stuttering): I ... I ... don't know.

Lord: I think you are starting to figure it out.

Parishioner: You don't expect me to believe I am talking to the Lord, do you? The Lord wouldn't use a cell phone. The Lord would send an angel or something.

Lord: That was before we had cell phones.

Parishioner: You mean God has to use a cell phone?

Lord: I thought it would get your attention. People are more likely to answer their cell phone than to answer me. But I don't have to use a cell phone. Try hanging up.

Parishioner: What?

Lord: Close up your cell phone. (Parishioner snaps the cell phone shut.) Can you hear me now?

Parishioner: Okay, you've made your point. But what do you want?

Lord: I want you. That's why I called.

Parishioner: But what do you want me to do?

Lord: Ah, now that's a little more complicated. I want you to proclaim my message to people.

Parishioner (shouting): Proclaim your message. I'm not a preacher. You need to call the church office.

Lord: I did. They suggested you.

Parishioner: I knew I shouldn't have taken that spiritual gifts class. Look, you've got the wrong person. I can't preach. I haven't got any training.

Lord: You believe in me, don't you?

Parishioner: Well, yes.

Lord: I will teach you what to say.

Parishioner: Look, I am hardly the right person to go around preaching to people in this church. These people know me. They know some of the things I've done in the past, things I am not very proud of. And even if they don't know about them, you do? How can you ask me to tell people about you, when you know very well that I haven't always followed you myself?

Lord: I've taken care of that.

Parishioner: How?

Lord: Didn't you just finish sharing the peace of Christ? Didn't you just recite words of forgiveness? Do you think those are meaningless words? You've been forgiven. Your sins are wiped away.

Parishioner: It can't be that easy.

Lord: No one said it was easy. It took a huge sacrifice. And I'm not talking about one of those Old Testament animal sacrifices. It took the sacrifice of my own Son to forgive you. Don't think that was easy!

Parishioner: But that does not make me worthy to be a preacher.

Lord: I'm the one who decides whether or not you are worthy. Now get going.

Parishioner: And what am I supposed to say?

Lord: Tell people that they need to turn their lives around. Tell them to quit worshiping their money or their career or their looks or their athletic ability. Tell them it's time to worship something bigger than themselves.

Parishioner: I can't say that to people. They will be offended.

Lord: Exactly.

Parishioner: They won't listen to me.

Lord: Exactly.

Parishioner (pause): You mean you don't want people to listen?

Lord: I want them to listen, but I don't expect them to understand. I want them to hear my message but I don't expect them to believe it.

Parishioner: Then what is the point of sending me? What is the point of this church or these people if you don't expect anyone to believe our message?

Lord: Sometimes you have to make things worse before they can get better. It's like an alcoholic. Sometimes you have to have a painful confrontation. You have to say things the alcoholic doesn't want to hear. And when they refuse to listen, you have to let them suffer the consequences. You have to stop protecting them and covering for them.

Parishioner: So, you think we're a bunch of alcoholics?

Lord: In a way. You are addicted to things. Some of you are addicted to possessions. If you are not continuously acquiring newer and nicer stuff, you are not happy, even if your house is already full. Others of you are addicted to success or recognition. Unless you keep getting more of it, you feel unfulfilled. It is like drugs. You need bigger hits to feel the same buzz.

Parishioner: So you want me to go around telling people that they are a bunch of alcoholics and drug addicts.

Lord: And hypocrites. Don't forget to tell them they are hypocrites. On Sundays they worship me, but the rest of the week they act as if I don't exist.

Parishioner: Obviously, you have never the books on how to win friends and influence people. You don't change people by criticizing them or putting them down. You change people by building them up and gaining their confidence.

Lord: I am not trying to change people. I am trying to make them face themselves. Your job is to tear away the pretense. If you speak my word to them and they don't listen, they can no longer pretend to be following me.

Parishioner: Don't you want people to follow you?

Lord: Of course. But I don't want them pretending to follow me. If they don't want me telling them how to live, let them try life on their own. Let them discover what it is like to be free of all constraints, even God's. Let them go into the far country and eat the swill of pigs. Until the prodigal son left home, he never realized what it meant to have a family.

Parishioner: So you want me to drive people away from you, so that they will discover what they are missing when you are gone?

Lord: You won't have to drive people away. Just tell them what they have to give up in order to follow me. Tell them they must give up their pride, their independence, their lust, their greed, their grudges or resentments, their desire to get ahead by putting others down. Tell people these things, and you won't have to drive them out. They will leave on their own.

Parishioner: It sounds like you don't want me to help the church grow. You want me to close it down.

Lord: Sometimes things have to get worse before they can get better. In the time of Isaiah I allowed my chosen people Israel to be conquered by the Assyrians and Babylonians. They were determined to worship other gods, so I gave them into the hands of those gods. But I never gave up on them. Out of the stump that was left I grew a branch that produced Jesus and the new life he came to bring.

Parishioner: And now you hope to grow new life in us.

Lord: You are catching on. If you keep on proclaiming my message, if you keep on telling people about me, something may yet grow. You may not see it. There may be many twists and turns in a person's life before it is revealed. But I can tell you this: Your efforts to share my word will not be wasted. As the rain comes down from the skies and does not return without watering the earth, so will my word that you speak. It will not return without accomplishing its purpose.

Parishioner: Let me see if I've got this straight. You want me to share your word with people who won't listen. You don't expect them to listen. And when they reject your word and wander away from you, you intend to let them go, so they will discover what life is like without you. Then, maybe, at some time in the future they will come back.

Lord: Yes, and do you know why they will come back? They will come back because they will remember what you told them years earlier when you thought they weren't listening.

Parishioner: So you think they really will listen.

Lord: Call it delayed listening—like a message on your cell phone that you suddenly discover has been there for a long time.

Parishioner (taking out his cell phone): Have you ever left a message on my phone?

Lord: It has been there all along. You are just now listening to it.

- Ken Onstot