

Jeremiah 1:4-10: Excuses, Excuses!

Luke 14:15-24

HPPC August 12, 2007

Scripture

Our second reading is taken from the very beginning of the book of Jeremiah. This book from the Hebrew Scriptures was written about 600 years before Christ during the reign of the young king Josiah. Jeremiah accurately predicts that the people of Israel will become exiled to Babylon. His theme is that God is just and must punish sins but God in God's grace promises that Israel will be restored and the covenant renewed.

Sermon

"My dog ate my homework"—that's the classic line heard by teachers throughout the ages. I went to a website this week called "The Mother of all excuses" that listed over 160 excuses for missing church. Some of my favorites include:

- I'm too young - I'll go when I'm too old to have any more fun.
- I'm still a sinner. —this one puzzles me—I thought that that was the point—that we realize we need a Savior
- I don't go to church on Sunday because getting the kids dressed in their Sunday Best first thing in the morning makes me cuss and curse the Lord.....very loudly.

One pastor became so frustrated that he ran this announcement in the bulletin:

NO EXCUSE SUNDAY: DEDICATED TO MISSING CHURCH ATTENDEES!
To make it possible for everyone to attend church this Sunday, we are going to have a special "No Excuse Sunday": Cots will be placed in the

foyer for those who say, "Sunday is my only day to sleep in." There will be a special section with lounge chairs for those who feel that our pews are too hard. Eye drops will be available for those with tired eyes from watching TV late Saturday night. We will have steel helmets for those who say, "The roof would cave in if I ever came to church." Blankets will be furnished for those who think the church is too cold, and fans for those who say it is too hot. Scorecards will be available for those who wish to list the hypocrites present. Relatives and friends will be in attendance for those who can't go to church and cook dinner, too. We will distribute "Stamp Out Stewardship" buttons for those that feel the church is always asking for money. One section will be devoted to trees and grass for those who like to seek God in nature. Doctors and nurses will be in attendance for those who plan to be sick on Sunday. The sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who never have seen the church without them. We will provide hearing aids for those who can't hear the preacher and earplugs for those who think he's too loud! Hope to see you there!

The folks in Jesus time also gave their excuses to God. Remember the parable of the great dinner. (my version) I can't come--I've got to go to my lake place property—I just have too much work to do—I have family obligations. The long and short of it is that our lives are too busy. We need a break. We do have too much work to do. We don't spend enough time with our families. But there's more. Like Jeremiah we're afraid. We're afraid to listen to God because God might tell us to do something that we don't want to do. We're afraid because we're not ready. We don't have enough experience or knowledge. We don't want to step beyond our comfort zones.

And God knows it. In fact God knows us. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." Years ago at PTS we were in the midst of a project on

Job in the wisdom literature class that I was taking. The story of Job in the Hebrew Scriptures is one of pain and suffering. We actually let Job have his day in court and we put God on trial. A great theologian Edward Dowey was called as a witness for the defense (for God). After being dully sworn in the lawyer said, “Dr. Dowey, how long have you known the defendant God?” After a momentary pause and with a twinkle in his eye the good professor replied, “Not nearly as long as I have been known.” You see as reformed Presbyterians it’s not so much about our response as it is about God’s grace. We are known long before any kind of a commitment to Christ or our knowing God. We are known deeply and without reserve. No one knows us like God. Not our mothers/fathers/siblings/spouses/children/ or life-long friend. God knows us best and knows what’s best for us. It’s a strange thing for us to be known so totally. It’s comforting and unsettling all at the same time. God knows our feelings including our fears. We can run but we can’t hide.

God will find us, like Jeremiah, and when God calls us we will resist, like Jeremiah, and God will rebuke us. “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.” God has heard all your excuses and more and yet God still calls. I wonder what God’s call was like for Jeremiah—was it a voice in the clouds? A human sounding voice? An inner voice? I don’t know.

Over the years people have asked me about my call to ministry. I didn’t hear a loud voice or a still small voice. As a young woman I had never seen a female pastor in a church setting. I was a psychology major as an undergraduate and thought that God was leading me to become a Christian counselor. I was taking a number of courses through the religion department and right after a senior seminar class my professor came up and asked me my plans for after graduation. I told him that I was going to

continue school in order to become a Christian counselor. He looked at me and said, “Sheryl, you’re just going into specialized ministry because you haven’t resolved the issue of the ordination of women yet.” He was right. Other voices encouraged me to explore this new sense of God’s call and new identity for my life. God’s call often comes through God’s people.

God calls each of us—not just those being led into ordained ministry. God’s call for each of us is the same—to be what God has made us for. God’s call for each of us is different—God has given us different gifts and placed us in different settings. What is God’s call for you? What awakens your passion, your creativity and your sense of being true to yourself? God has rich purposes for your life. God yearns for you, has wonderful things in store for you, and grieves when you turn away. As one writer put it, “Jeremiah calls us to repent and to grieve when we fail to respond to a love that passionately desires our good. As we respond we discover the compassion of God who alone can restore us. Our Lord calls all of us to integrity so that we might not lose our true identity as children of God.”

We are God’s children and called as individuals, but God also calls the community, the Church. I have seen the unique gifts God has given to you. HPPC is an amazing church that I have quickly come to love. It is a church of welcome. It is a gathering of people that genuinely care about and for one another. It is a community that desires to share Jesus’ love with those in need. The movement from within the church to beyond the church is growing—we’re moving from inward to an outward focus of faith. There is a new sense at HPPC of reaching out.

As we saw in the story in Luke, we cannot be content with inviting and reaching out only to those like us. God’s call to us is to the “poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” whether they look and act like us or not.

What is God's call for HPPC especially for this interim time? "Who are we?" "What are we called to do?" "Who is our Neighbor?" We need to wrestle with some important questions about our identity, our purpose, and our mission. In 2 weeks the search committee will be holding some town meetings. The purpose is to give you a voice in the process of calling your next associate pastor. This is a time to ask "Where are we going and what do we need in our new leadership to help us get there." You see, the interim is an opportunity for renewal and growth.

We need to pray for God's direction and wisdom. We all need to pray fervently for the work of the associate pastor nominating committee. God will guide us. The word of the Lord will come to us. We must wait. But it's not a passive waiting. We must wait in anticipation that the Lord will speak. It's important that we're in a state of readiness so that we can hear and listen. For this to happen we need to be present for God and as a community. We have to let go of our excuses and trust God's call for us. Remember God knows us and knows what we need. God promises to speak through us and to always be with us.

I want to share with you a story of God's presence and guidance. Alice and John are Yupik Alaskans living on the St. Lawrence Islands. When Alice was in Seattle sharing about their ministry among the native people she said that is was her first time in the lower 48. Alice is 70. Alice recalled how as a youth she and her family would walk across the iced-over island bridge to her cousins in Russia. But it was another story that really touched me. One day her son and a friend went fishing. Their small boat became trapped when dense fog rolled in and then ice closed in on their boat. Fearing that the small craft would be crushed they radioed home. They were able to communicate their crisis, but then lost radio contact. Alice was afraid for her son and his friend. So, she went to the highest place on the island—the dump—she climbed to the top and in the fog

reached up and held God's hands. She prayed for guidance. Later, she found out that it was at that moment that she was holding God's hands that they had reestablished radio contact. Her son told his father John that there was a crack in the ice. John said, "Row into the crack." By rowing into the crack they found their way home.

Wherever God sends us—even into the crack--God goes with us. We believe in a sending God. God sent Jeremiah and the faithful in all generations. We see that God's very nature is to send. God the Father and the Spirit sent the Son, Jesus promised that God would send the Holy Spirit, The Spirit sends the Church of Jesus Christ out into the world. Jeremiah was sent—he was commissioned as the Lord physically touched him and placed words in his mouth. At HPPC God has done the work of uprooting and tearing down some things. We are called now to begin to build and to plant again. Planting the new church, Latah Valley is one glimpse of that sending. Some of you are being called to that ministry. We are also being sent downtown as we develop partnerships with the House of Charity and the Mission Community Outreach center among others. Finally, we are being called south. Called to our south hill neighborhoods, schools, places of employment and families. Our mission is right here.

God doesn't ask Jeremiah and God doesn't ask us. God is Sovereign. God speaks and it is so—we are sent. The question is what do you need to do in order to fully cooperate with that calling? God has made us ready. Do not be afraid. God be with you.

Amen

Sheryl Kinder-Pyle

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