

Celebration Sunday
January 31, 2016
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
David Noble

Jeremiah 1:4-10

⁴Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, ⁵“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.” ⁶Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” ⁷But 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, ⁸Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.” ⁹Then 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. ¹⁰See, 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.”

Ephesians 4:7-8, 11-13

⁷But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ⁸Therefore it is said, “When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.”

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

John 15:9-16

⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

1.
Being chosen.

God put out a hand, Jeremiah says, and God touched Jeremiah’s mouth, saying, “Speak for me. Speak to the people.” God touched Jeremiah’s mouth as if to put the words right in there, to place them right on Jeremiah’s tongue so all he had to do was say them.

But Jeremiah balked.

For the words God was putting in Jeremiah’s mouth were sour words-- sour, bitter words—that he knew would be rejected as soon as he said them. ‘Speak up,’ God was saying, ‘tell the people they have disobeyed me, they have turned away from me, they have mistreated, even exploited, the weak and the poor. Remind them of why I chose them in the first place—to show the world what life could really be like: that communities could be built on mercy and love and justice and fairness. That they could be an example of my righteousness and my grace. Warn them to turn around. Stand up, speak out, Jeremiah.’

But Jeremiah kicked the dirt, “Aw shucks, God, I’m no better than a boy, I don’t know how to speak, I don’t have the experience, I don’t have the credentials, I’m not the right one to do this.”

Not easy being chosen. Not easy being called to stand up for something that you know is good, but makes you different and might put you on the outside looking in. Who could blame Jeremiah for resisting?

2.

And who could blame us?

Every time we gather at the baptismal font we hear that ‘we do not choose God, God chooses us.’ And then God sends us chosen ones out to stand up for what is right, for what is good, to create a community rooted in God’s love and mercy and righteousness.

I grew up in a town that struggled in “standing up.” My hometown had 18,000 inhabitants and seven Presbyterian churches. (You know right off the bat that something is not right about that. Presbyterians have to have 7 congregations in one little town?) And along with us Presbyterians there were the Methodists and Baptists and Catholics and Orthodox and even a synagogue. But in the sixties when I grew up there, no one was willing to speak up about prejudice and racism. Because everyone wanted to fit in, not stand out. Adults weren’t any better at handling peer pressure than we teenagers were.

A couple of years ago I had a parishioner who came to talk with me several times about her work place. For some reason her work colleagues liked to make life difficult for her- giving her extra hard assignments, lying to her boss and trying to get her fired, teasing her when no one else was looking. No one would speak up for her. Not even her supervisors would step in. She just had to keep her head down and endure.

Standing up for the love that Jesus lived means we will be different. We might end up on the outside looking in.

Jeremiah was reluctant to speak up to his whole nation. But the truth is, it can be hard to speak up just in our own community, our own workplace, our own school.

3.

And God knows that.

God says to Jeremiah, “Yes you are going to speak for me. That is what I have in mind for you. But remember, I have loved you since before you were born. I have ordained you and appointed you to this life. You shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, but do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.”

Jesus tells his disciples, “I have chosen you. I lay down my life for you. And the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.”

And Paul tells the church, “Jesus has chosen you and given you gifts so you may do the work of ministry.”

God has made it clear what the goal of the kingdom is. We know when we pray, “thy kingdom come” what kind of world that is going to be—gracious, loving, merciful. That world is on the way. That kingdom is coming.

4.

And while God is going to use you and me to bring it into reality, it rest on God’s determination, God’s grace, God’s gifts. Before we were a twinkle in God’s eye, God loved us. God claimed us in baptism and then gave us the Holy Spirit to give us gifts for ministry. And to top it off, Jesus said when it’s hard to do what is right, what is loving, what is merciful-- ask for help. Your prayers will be answered.

Just as Jeremiah, God chooses you. Just as the first disciples, Jesus chooses you. God brings us together to share our faith and to be prepared to go out. You are here only a few hours a week. The vast majority of your time is out in the world, at home, at work, at school, with neighbors and friends and family. And all that time during the week, we are still the church.

You have careers, jobs, you go to school, take up activities. You are engaged in the world in many ways. And every one of us comes across situations, problems, brokenness, sinfulness. We come upon things that are not right and need to be addressed. Sometimes our jobs address that brokenness naturally, maybe as a teacher or nurse or lawyer, we work in a field that allows us to directly nudge the world toward the kingdom that is coming.

But our place in the world, whatever it is we are called to do in our lives, is an opportunity to be aware of people and situations that are in need of grace and mercy and love and righteousness. Whatever we do during the week, God places us amongst people and situations to represent the kingdom that is coming. Through our work, through our responsibilities, through our relationships we are in ministry to our neighbors and to our world.

Through Jesus Christ God has chosen you and me. Perhaps God will touch our mouths and give us words to say. Perhaps God will give us gifts, gifts of kindness, or peacemaking, or mercy, or healing that can speak to people and situations through our actions. It was Saint Francis who said, “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.” God may touch our hands through which we can speak justice and love.

I asked a month ago if we could identify today as Celebration Sunday, because I have been seeing so much ministry going on here during Advent and Christmas and Epiphany. I see God laying hands on us, enabling us to be about God’s work, and I want us to recognize it, give thanks for it, and celebrate.

So, let me identify some of ways I believe God has spoken through you over the past two months. I counted 17 separate events, but narrowed it down to the following two categories:

1. Ministries to the community- God speaks through our words and actions
 - a. Christmas Pageant- 85 attending, many friends, neighbors who wanted to participate in telling the Christmas Story
 - b. New Year's Alternative Celebration- 160 in attendance, a fellowship time for all ages
 - c. 60 Christmas presents for 13 children and youth
 - d. New Beginnings Interviews- 19 nonprofit agencies, to partner for service
 - e. IHN Week- 90 participants, including dozens of friends, to care for 4 families
2. Ministries within the Church- God speaks through our words and actions
 - a. Special Music for Christmas Pageant and for Christmas Eve- instrumental ensemble (strings, woodwind, brass), steel drum, youth instrumental solos and duet, guitar for Pageant and guitar for Christmas Eve, Central Church Choir (music being one of the greatest gifts God has given us)
 - b. Cookies, Cocoa, and Carols (fellowship, pastoral care, and guests)
 - c. Deacons prayer chain restart
 - d. Vincent Henry- graduation, PTS youth leadership certification, may God speak through your words and actions
 - e. Retiring elder and deacon- Vincent Henry and Pat Dancy
 - f. Session Budget Discernment process conclusion

And now we celebrate God appointing leaders among us, as we install the deacons and elders for the class of 2018... (call Clerk forward)