

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, August 22, 2010
Thirteenth Sunday of Pentecost – Proper 16-C
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17; “Consecrated People”
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It seems to me that it's a given that those of us who gather here on Sunday mornings are looking for some quiet time with God, to praise God, to thank God, to worship God and to get some clearer vision of God's will for our lives. With our brothers and sisters in Christ we also come here looking for strength and courage to do just that – we know we don't have all the answers - we come here hoping to hear something, sing something, say something in prayer that will give us some direction, some comfort. We know that we can pray, praise, read the Bible at home or anywhere else but there's something about this place, this time set apart when the community gathers that gives us a strength we don't always find anywhere else. Maybe it's the ritual, the discipline of the liturgy, the beauty of this room with the stained glass and candles – it doesn't matter what it is; the hope is that we experience the love of God and each other while we are gathered here. I think all of us are searching, trying to know to what God is calling us, trying to know more meaning in our lives and somehow we truly believe that we can find at least a hint of that direction here.

We heard two familiar stories this morning – both to do with God's call to ministry, both involving unlikely candidates, both showing God's persistence, and again, God's outrageous intrusion into our lives. Both stories show us God's constant presence and compassion – one more gently than the other for sure. And both have a challenge to us as well as we wonder about our own callings to ministry in the various arenas of our lives.

We have two different, yet the same, people struggling with God's call – one who is quite verbal about it and another who never speaks. One who answers, “who, me?” in almost a defiant sort of way. And one who silently answers “who me?” incredulous, stunned. One who doubts his worth because he says he's too young. One who doubts her worth partly because she's a woman and also for 18 years nobody has even really “seen” her even in her beloved place of worship. There are so many levels to these stories – they're so rich, and I daresay something in one or both of them will speak to us if we have the ears to listen. But most importantly, these stories are about God: God's love and compassion. God's persistence. The call to each and every one of us to be in relationship with God and each other. God meets each and every one of us where we are – the question is how will we respond.

First, Jeremiah. The book opens with Jeremiah hearing God call him – even though Jeremiah was the son of a priest, there is no evidence that he was looking for this call – “the word of the Lord came to me”, he says. And when God intruded into his life with the call, he reacted as most of us probably would: with excuses: who me? Not me. I'm too young. I'm not good at public speaking. I'm only a child. Words of defiance, protest, indeed – and what is God's response? It's a rebuke – God tells him that he'll go wherever he is sent. He will speak whatever he's told to speak. In fact, God says that the

words will be put into his mouth. The emphasis is on the initiative and action of God in the call, isn't it. Sometimes God's call just sneaks up on us. Sometimes we hear the voice of God loud and clear. Sometimes we protest loudly and longly – not me, God. I can't. Not me, God. I don't want to. Or Not me, God. Maybe later. But God is persistent and God's will *will* be done, in spite of our fear and hesitation. Just as God tells Jeremiah not to be afraid, God tells us not to be afraid either. Because God will keep safe those called as they respond.

I've experienced this in my own life – It didn't seem to make sense to give up a 25 year career as a Bank officer to go to seminary – or even when I was called to move away from home and family to come here to Glen Ridge – I kept saying the same thing Jeremiah did – not me, God. You can't really mean me. But I got the same message – don't be afraid. And I came to realize that when God calls us to a ministry of any kind, whether being a prophet, teacher, banker, broker, or ordained minister or anything else – God promises the tools, the means to make it happen. And these promises of God do seem extravagant, even reckless sometimes. But God will never let us down – ever. And it's an awesome thing, in the greatest sense of that sometimes overused word, to see that God is able, through ordinary people, like you and me, to clear out old worlds and bring new worlds into being.

The call of God tells us more about God than about us – isn't it crazy that God needs someone, especially an inexperienced young person like Jeremiah to do what needs done? And when Jeremiah objects – he's really not acting humbly – he truly isn't good at public speaking – reminds me a little of Moses – that was his protest too. But God promised Moses all he needed to do the job right – Aaron stayed by his side as speaker. And God also promised Jeremiah all he needs to do the job right. Perhaps God believes in Jeremiah more than he believes in himself – maybe God sees something in Jeremiah, some potential there that Jeremiah can't see. And so it is with us I think – God believes in us too more than we believe in ourselves. God sees some potential us too that we can't always see. And God will give us all we need to do our job right too – to set us free to do God's work in the world, to respond to the call that God has for all of us, with or without our protest and defiance.

Our second lesson today is about another ordinary person – and her response to God's call, spoken through God incarnate, Jesus. It's a powerful story that shows the unasked for, unexpected call of God coming incredibly upon another person – this time a woman. Jeremiah, a child, and this unnamed woman – neither one of them had any status at all in their cultures – this should make us take notice of what's happening here- at the time children and women were barely seen as human. Society then and now can have a way of dehumanizing us, can't it – we can get caught up in this dehumanizing process and one result of that is that we can begin to fail to see our worth before God. But these two extraordinary people call us up short. These two stories of God's activity working remind us that we are all children of Abraham, loved and cherished and responsible just because.

She's bent over, crippled, unable to stand upright, in desperate need, and she comes to the synagogue to worship God – perhaps to pray silently for help while others teach, read the lesson, others pray aloud.

She comes to the synagogue full of people, people just like her in their need, some not knowing just how much in need they are. Just like us. We don't always know what's

going on with the person in front of us or behind us, do we. Need isn't always very obvious.

For 18 years a spirit has crippled her – and she comes to the synagogue to worship. And I get the feeling that she came alone, sat alone, left alone. For 18 years she was there and nobody saw her, really saw her. Or talked to her. Or cared. But she was there – I daresay we wouldn't stay here if that happened – probably wouldn't come to worship here more than once or maybe twice – certainly not 18 years.

To the others at the synagogue, she's nobody important. She's just another person worshipping in the synagogue of her ancestors. She's just another person carrying a heavy burden, and not doing well with it at all. She's worn down, worn out – she's come to believe that she's not important, that she has nothing to offer, that maybe she's done something to deserve her lot in life. How terribly sad. But for 18 years she carries all this to God in worship. There is a flame of hope for her – she's persistent. We know God is persistent.

Maybe part of the appeal of this story is that she is us, and we are her. Bent over, crippled, oppressed by a spirit – perhaps a spirit of self-doubt, a spirit that convinces her she has no strength, no ability, no purpose, a spirit of grief, of fear, of loneliness. Mental, emotional crippling is every bit as devastating as physical limitation. A hole in the soul doesn't show – unless we have the eyes to see it.

But here's Jesus, teaching in the synagogue, and he sees her. He sees that she's in pain – that a spirit has oppressed her, bent her over for these so many years. And in the midst of his teaching he calls her to come to him.

How easy is she to overlook. How easy are all those like her easy to miss. She is the poorest of the poor children of Abraham, a woman – with a crippling condition. She is not only bent over but to most others she's also a pain and a bother, someone who needs more than they give, more than they want to give.

As Jesus looked out over the crowd in worship that day, he could have seen her as a face in the crowd – but he didn't – he saw her as one who needed to be set free – to be valued, to be healed. How surprised she must have been to have been called forward. After 18 years.

She didn't ask Jesus for anything! She was there to worship. When he sees her and calls to her, I'm sure she wonders, who me? But she gets up and she comes. Then he touches her and speaks to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

Now, Jesus is breaking all kinds of rules here: first he speaks to her. Jewish men did not speak to woman. At least not in a civilized society.

Second, he calls her to the center of the synagogue – only men sat in the center of the synagogue. He touches her – something forbidden under the holiness code – that code which protected men from a woman's uncleanness and from her sinful seductiveness. He calls her, daughter of Abraham – outrageous because at the time it was believed that women were saved through their men. To call her a daughter of Abraham is to make her a full-fledged member of the nation of Israel, with equal standing before God.

And he heals on the Sabbath – the holy day. He demonstrates God's compassion for people over ceremony and he reclaims the Sabbath for the celebration of God's liberal goodness.

Wow – it doesn't get any more revolutionary than that – but we should come to expect that of God – tearing down barriers, the breaking all the rules. After 18 years of persistence she stood up straight and began praising God – out loud – all because of Jesus' touch!

That touch from Jesus is what so many of us need – the touch healing us, the touch calling us into a new and fulfilling life. God calls us – we say, who me? God says, yes you.

Think of the joy that flooded the very soul of that woman – think of the joy that would flood your soul – even as a witness to this.

Something else happens in the story too: The leader of the synagogue was indignant – how can Jesus heal on the Sabbath? There are 6 days on which work ought to be done! Let the woman come on another day to be healed – there's not to be work on the Sabbath!

How absurd is this.

Jesus teaches us sometimes you gotta break the rules when they don't make sense in God's overall plan for us to love one another. What are the rules and regulations are really all about?

So Jesus responds strongly, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham who has been in bondage for 18 years, be set free on the Sabbath day? The point is this: for Jesus, God's chief concern is that we should love and care for another; that all people should be brought into a healing and saving relationship with God. And with one another.

To Jesus, God is not primarily a rule-maker. Rather God is a life giver. God gave life to Jeremiah – and through Jeremiah to the people of the promised land. God gave life to the bent over woman.

After both Jeremiah and this unnamed woman, thought, "Who, me?" they responded to God's call, absurd as it might have seemed.

And it's our task is to listen for and to God's call as well. And it's our task is to respond. We need to be set free for this – for God's plan and purpose. And when we do that, it's for sure that nothing will ever be the same – our ability to hold on to our sense of who we are and what we want to be about almost surely will be swept away by what God has to say to us and what God wants us to do. Each of us has a spirit in us that oppresses us, that wars against the spirit of God. But thanks be to God, the Spirit of God is stronger than all the spirits that might oppress us.

Jesus sees us. He discerns who we are and unbidden, he calls to us. Just as he called to the bent over woman. Just as God called to Jeremiah. Freely he stretches out his hand, touching us. Unasked, he seeks to set us free. Patiently, he waits to speak a word to us – will we hear? Will we recognize him in our midst? Will we accept what he has to offer us?

With all his protests, Jeremiah did just that. In a state of amazement, the unnamed woman did just that too. Will we? May it be so.

Let us pray: Lord, when you call us forth to join in your work, give us ears to hear your call. Still the chatter and the noise of our busy world so that we might hear your voice calling us by name. And when you call us to come forth to take part in your work in our world, help us to say yes. Overcome our sense of unworthiness and

inadequacy. Calm our self-doubts and our fears. Give us the gifts we need to serve you faithfully as your ministers. And grant us the grace, we pray, to be thankful, that of all those you could have called to serve you, you called us. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.