

January 31, 2010

Luke 4: 21-30 and Jeremiah 1: 4-10

“Reticent response”

Apparently there was little reticence in my response that particular evening. In fact, Benedicte, the Rotary foreign exchange student living with me at the time chastised me for being downright rude to the caller. But, hey! What can I say? The day had been long and tiring, dinner was on the table and I had absolutely no time for small telephone talk with a telemarketer! So it was that my response was terse and the phone was quickly placed back where it belonged. The next time it rang, I simply ignored and went about the business of the evening. In other words, I did what I wanted to do.

Frankly, despite secret desires to be so, I’m not quite so bold or, as Benedicte would point out, “rude” when the Lord God is tapping me on the shoulder. However, I do tend to ignore from time to time. What about you? Have you ever considered that a preoccupation with doing one’s own thing tends to get in the way of proper response to God’s call? Human beings that we are, most of us can come up with all kinds of excuses as did have our ancestors of every time and place. Moses reminded God of his speech impediment. Jeremiah said he was but an ignorant kid. Jonah just plain didn’t like those godless Ninevites and Paul was so filled with rage that he had to be zapped on the head and blinded before he paid serious attention. But who can really fault them or any of us for our reticence? Positive response to divine challenge has always been and will continue to be daunting to say the least.

Each Sabbath day you, the faithful here at First Presbyterian Church, Mankato, sit in the pews and await what you hope will be pearls of theological wisdom spewed from the lips of your pastor. She, on the other hand, stands before you attempting to appear calm and collected while experiencing the enormity of the task before her. From all that she has gleaned from her colleagues, such is par for the course. The spoken, unspoken and perceived expectations of congregants are overwhelming.

In his commentary on the lections for this day, Professor Bruce Epperly of Lancaster Theological Seminary wrote: “Jeremiah felt a...dissonance between the enormity of God’s call and his modest experience. ‘I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy,’ he claimed. Sometimes when I come to the pulpit, I ask the same question. How can I share God’s wisdom with this congregation when today I have so little wisdom myself? How can I say anything meaningful or definitive about God when I know that our planet is just a speck in a universe of 100 billion galaxies, emerging over 14 billion years?” (*The Christian Century*, January 26, 2010, p. 20) It’s little wonder that most clergy persons, no matter their preparedness or amount of sleep the night before, go home after the Sabbath Day worship and take what they consider to be well deserved naps!!

What’s both humbling and of interest to me is the unexpected responses to messages delivered. Naturally, there are the acclaimed preachers who are able to share

erudite messages, captivating the attention of congregants week after week after week. So scholarly are they in their preparations and dynamic in their deliveries that men, women and children leave various sanctuaries actually remembering what they have heard! Those of us not included in their ranks ponder why some sermons fly and others fall right smack to the ground. And, oh how bruised our egos are when noting wandering eyes and nodding heads!

Perhaps it is our preoccupation with perfection and acceptance that hinders positive and timely response. Wonder, when will we...clergy and laity alike...ever fully acknowledge the limitless grace and unconditional love of our amazing God? When will we let our defenses down long enough to walk forward in trust? When will we be bold enough, as was one Jesus of Nazareth, to speak God's truth as we hear it without fearing ridicule and/or rejection?

Sometimes children and youth, despite their relative inexperience in life, are braver than we their elders. Sam, an eighth grader in Smalltown, USA, is an example. After lunch one recent day, he and some of his classmates were engaged in lively banter outside on the school grounds. Keeping watch over and listening to them was Mr. Edwards, the basketball coach. At some point, Tim, a relative newcomer to the school, a young man whose physical attributes were the butt of countless jokes, made his way cautiously to where Sam and the others were standing. As Tim passed Mr. Edwards, the coach called: "Hey, Java (Tim's less-than-complimentary nickname), come over here!"

Despite the fact that Mr. Edwards was the adult and should have set the example, it was young Sam who did so. Speaking directly to the coach in a matter-of-fact but polite tone, he said simply: "His name is Tom."

"Well," replied the teacher/coach with some annoyance, "if he wants me to call him 'Tom' he'll say so!"

Sam repeated simply: "His name is Tom," then returned to his friends.

What Mr. Edwards thought or might have said next was never made known. Perhaps he later went into the teachers' room and commented on the arrogance of a youth who dared to challenge his elder. Maybe he went so far as to question just who's child Sam was anyway for surely he couldn't have come from one of the community's decent and orderly families!!

The teacher/coach was convinced that he had a handle on all things youth as well as all things educational. The villagers listening to Jesus equally deluded themselves by believing that they not only had the hometown boy figured out, they also, as said theologian Bruce Epperly, "they also believed that they had *God* figured out. They believed that they knew all about God, and about the scope and limits of God's love. When Jesus describes God's care for foreigners and enemies, they try to kill him.

Hometown boy or not, Jesus violates the theological mores that were at the heart of his neighbors' faith." (Ibid.)

What I believe is that Jesus accepted the challenges of God's call in his life, daring to carry the prophet Isaiah's words to those who knew him best. And the young Sam, without or without awareness, was responding to an inner calling with conviction in order that there be justice for a classmate. There was no reticence on the part of either.

However, despite our best intentions it's truly difficult for us, including the most devout in our midst, to be consistent in our responses. Even though few contemporary American or European Christians face the same threats as did the prophets and Jesus, there are, as notes the Rev. Dr. John Buchanan, "issues confronting us (that) are enormous....(ones) that deserve our intellectual, theological and spiritual best." (*The Christian Century*, January 26, 2010, p. 3) So, in my humble opinion, there are reasons however weak for reticent, even ignored responses. Our complicated world makes the challenges of ministry and witness loom overwhelming.

Consider, if you will, the competition we face on Sunday mornings. There are all kinds of family and athletic activities that lure people away from sanctuaries of varying shapes, sizes and traditions. Advanced technology that produces such creativity as seen in the movie "*Avatar*" pales the same old, same old style of worship. Dynamic deliveries and exciting promises of televangelists like Joel Osteen are ever so much more appealing than the cries of prophets or ordinary people of faith.

The other day my son took me into Houston for a tour of Rice University, the Museum of Art, and some of the city's interesting neighborhoods. As we were headed home on some highway that goes around the city, Kirk said: "Hey, Mom, I want to show you something."

Then it was that he pointed to a building on our right that had the following inscription: "*Osteen Ministries*." As if I couldn't read, Kirk pointed out that the edifice is where Joel Osteen hangs out on a regular basis. I mumbled recognition after which my son remarked: "You don't think much of him, do you, Mom?"

I admitted that Osteen is not exactly my cup of tea in the religion department. However, I had to acknowledge that what he does, he does well. He pulls in the crowds every time he preaches. Now I ask you, as I have asked myself on numerous occasions before and after visiting Houston, isn't this what you and I wish would happen here every week? Don't we envy the preachers who pull in the masses and wonder what's wrong with our church and minister?

In the days since going past the big building with Osteen's name proudly displayed on the big building that looks like an arena, I've thought more about the prophets,

Jesus, all of us and God's call. Naturally, each one of us is asked to perform a unique task in ministry and each of us responds uniquely. Some of us are gung ho, some are quite reticent, and some, like Jonah, try to run in the opposite direction. But, as the Apostle Paul reminds us again and again and again, each of us is important to the whole. And, to my knowledge, there's nothing in the Bible that suggests ministry is about increasing numbers in our pews or adding dollars to our coffers.

Theologian Bruce Epperly ended his commentary on today's lectionary readings this way: "Jeremiah is a good model for us. Like Jeremiah, we are the recipients of a calling and a blessing, and we need to embrace God's call in our lives. Like Jeremiah, we need to temper our spiritual experiences and vocational gifts with the recognition that others are experiencing God in different ways and may have experiences and vocations that differ from our own." (*The Christian Century*, January 26, 2010, p. 20)

For me, this means that even those whose theology is quite different from my own are responding as they believe they should. What is important for all of us is that we respond. Amen.

