

## **“We Speak God’s Word”**

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, August 21, 2016  
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Readings from Scripture: Luke 13:10-17 and Jeremiah 1:4-10**

*Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “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 whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.*

*Luke 13:10-17*

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

*Then 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. See, 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.”*

*Jeremiah 1:4-10*

Let us pray. Gracious God, we open all of who we are to the power of your Holy Spirit, and we pray that the words that we carry within, the words that we’ve heard read from the Gospel of Luke and from the prophet Jeremiah, the words we’ve offered in prayer and in song and the words that you will lay upon my heart this morning to share--that all of them will be transformed into the living word of Jesus Christ. We pray that that word would go forth and do its work within us, among us and through us so that we might be faithful followers in the world in which you call us to love and to serve. It is in the name of the faithful one, Jesus Christ, that we pray. Amen.

Last week I had the blessed privilege of going to Baltimore, Maryland, where the heat index was 115 degrees! I don’t know about frying an egg on the sidewalk, but you could fry a pastor in a rental car in Baltimore. I went for the conclusion of a year-long program on contemplative leadership. I went in order to spend a week thinking about, talking about and being in stillness, and how that stillness is connected to the deep flow of God’s love in our lives. Our invitation was to allow our ego, our defenses, our mind and intellect, all of who we are and what we present to the public, to settle down into that deep reservoir of God’s love, and to do so through stillness. Now what I hadn’t expected was that the program which began on Tuesday morning would be filled with people talking about how to enter stillness. Tuesday morning and

Tuesday afternoon, just before dinner and then after dinner all the way until 9:30, and again on Wednesday and on Thursday and somewhere on Thursday night, my circuit breaker that I have inside of me for the volume of words that I can hear at any time went “click”. I went and found the leaders of the program and said, “I cannot do this anymore. I need the morning off.” And so they talked to each other and said, “Well, David, would you like to just leave now and come back at lunch, or would you like to come in for worship?” And I said, “I’ll leave now.” And they said, “Please come in and tell the group what’s happening.” And I said, “Okay.” I walked into the room that we had been sharing--there were only 9 participants in the program and 2 to 4 leaders depending on which section it was--and there on the table right in the middle--our sacred table--was a bouquet of sunflowers and the word “rejoice” carved in wood. Now in case you haven’t noticed it, I’m a little partial to sunflowers, because my call to ministry was a vision of weeds being transformed into sunflowers. I sat down in the circle prepared to say “I’m ready to go and spend the morning by myself floating in the pool.” But instead I sat there for worship.

The woman leading the worship began by saying that she had the sense of wanting to talk about joy and rejoicing, hence the sunflowers and the word carved on the table. But the night before because she was afraid that she was going to have to drive some of our colleagues to dinner, she went out to clean out her car and she reached down beside her chair and said, “I found these.” And she lifted up a plastic garbage bag and she pulled out a pair of black, worn sneakers. She set them on the table and she said, “Instead of talking about joy this morning, I want to talk about Harry.” This woman serves two congregations in rural Pennsylvania and in one of those communities, there is a man that everyone knows and his name is Harry. He walks around town all day long, shuffling along the sidewalk or the road, never seeming to have anywhere in particular to go but always on the move. She said that several months ago, he started to come to church and everyone just made space for him. Harry wasn’t the kind of person who graduated from high school or college. Everyone knew him. They tried to take care of him the best they could. When he showed up they just cleared a space and let him land. She said then one Sunday after a sermon, he walked into her office, handed her a pair of shoes in a paper bag and said, “Here. You take these and give them to someone in need.” She shared that she didn’t know anyone in greater need than Harry.

It was sitting in that worship service on that Friday morning, thinking I was done, when I reconnected to my call into the ministry in a profound way. And I reconnected through the image of sunflowers and my experience of what it was like to be called. And I watched as someone who had thought she was going to go one way, allowed the Spirit to turn her in a completely different direction and in so doing bless all of us in that group and I’m sure that many of the people in that circle are preaching about Harry this morning. It was such a powerful moment where she talked about what it was like to see him shuffle around town and then sit in the pew and then offer really the most important gift that he had, his shoes, so that someone else could be blessed. She said at one point in her story that in a weird way for her, Harry had become like a prophet. So I connect the story of call to ministry both in Jeremiah and the story that I’ve shared with this invitation to be prophetic that is lived out for us in the passage from Jeremiah.

God says to Jeremiah, “I knew you before you were born, I’ve consecrated you and you are going to go speak to the people on my behalf.” The call. You are going to go preach the Gospel. You are going to go transform communities. You are going to go serve those people who are hungry and give them something--a word from the Lord--that will feed them. You will caution them when they go astray. You will encourage them when they lag. You will do all that you can to build up the community of faith. This is the call to serve, to be prophetic. And it is a call not just for those who are ordained into ministry, it is a call that all of us share as Christians. We believe in the priesthood of all believers. And so each of us, like Jeremiah, is called to speak God’s truth, in love, in joy, in mercy and in grace. And Jeremiah, like so many of us says, “What? Me?” This is a typical aspect of the call story for each of us, and especially for the prophets in the old testament. We are called by God and everyone says, “Wait a minute, it couldn’t be true.” Jeremiah says, “I’m too young. I’m just a boy.” Moses says, “I’m unskilled.” Isaiah says, “I’m not worthy.” Ezekiel says, “I don’t know what to say.” Mary says, “What? Me? A virgin?”

All of us--all of us--have objections to the call of God to be people who embody the word of love. And what happens next? That which I felt I have preached on 8,000 times and will preach on 8,000 more. DO NOT BE AFRAID. "Do not be afraid of them," God says to Jeremiah. "I will be with you. I will deliver you," says the Lord. "Do not be afraid" God says to Abram and to Hagar and to Isaac and to Rachel and to Joseph and to Jacob and to Moses and to Joshua and to Ruth and to Elijah and to Isaiah and to Ezekiel and to Zechariah and Mary and the disciples and on and on and on--do not be afraid.

We live in a land of great fear and it is hungry for prophets who can speak goodness and peace. I was stunned when I looked up on my computer the phrase "do not be afraid" and saw that it occurs 367 times in scripture and it's almost always spoken to some great figure of the faith--Abraham, Isaac, Rachel, Joseph, Jacob, Moses, the disciples, Paul.... It's amazing to me that each of us is invited as we are called to speak goodness and as we experience our own objections that each of us is called to realize that the promise of God's presence and protection is for us, that God goes with us. "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield. Your reward will be very great." The Lord said to Moses, "Do not be afraid of Pharaoh for I have given him into your hand with all his people and all his land." "And now, my daughter, Ruth, do not be afraid. I will do for you all that you have asked. For all the assembly of people know that you are a worthy woman." An angel of the Lord said to Elijah, "Do not be afraid." An angel said to Mary, "Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God." Jesus said to the disciples, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be fishing and catching people." And to Paul, "Do not be afraid but speak and do not be silent."

What is God saying to you after you hear "Do not be afraid"? What are you being commissioned into after being called and after having all your objections and then hearing again the promise of God's presence: do not be afraid? And then what? What is it that you are called to do? Are you called to be like Christ in the Gospel of Luke who breaks one of the 10 commandments? (Gasp) He breaks one of the sacred rules that Moses brought down from the mountain in his encounter with God. What do you want the people of Israel to know and to do? And he chisels them in stone and one of them is "Keep the sabbath holy." And Jesus comes and he breaks the rules. And in so doing he liberates and heals a woman who has suffered far too long. He provides an opportunity for someone who has been shunned to be welcomed back into the community of faith.

I wonder if we are being called to be like Christ. Called to break rules in order to heal and to care. Called to break rules in order to love and provide comfort. Called to break rules in order to allow someone to rejoin the community of faith. I'm not sure what rules you carry within that prevent you from speaking and embodying God's word, but all of us are being called to break those in order to be the people of Christ. Amen.