

Your Calling
Ephesians 4:1-16
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First Central Congregational UCC
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After her ordination as a priest in the Episcopal Church, Barbara Brown Taylor, one of the most admired ministers and preachers of our time, ordered her new clothes—in particular the collar which many Christian ministers wear. After the collar arrived, she took it into the bathroom to look in the mirror and figure out how to put it on. She writes that it took her about thirty minutes to figure it out.

While she was attempting to put the collar on, she remembered two stories. The first story was of an experience in the Manhattan subway some years before. One day while in the subway tunnels, she had become lost. The stress, fear, and anxiety built to the point that she was on the verge of a panic attack. At that moment, she saw a nun in a traditional habit, and simply the presence of this nun calmed her. Taylor writes, “I did not for one moment consider that [the nun] was there for any purpose other than to rescue me.”

The other story that returned to her memory that day while attempting to put the collar on was from her childhood. One day, as a little girl, she was riding in the car with her mother, gazing out the window watching the world pass by. Her young eyes caught sight of a group of men wearing striped, black-and-white outfits. They were working in a field beside the road. Surprised by the strange clothing, she asked her mother why the men were dressed like that. Her mother answered that they were prison inmates and that they were dressed that way so that they would stand out in case they escaped.

It was these stories she remembered as she put the collar on for the first time. Here’s what she writes:

Looking in the bathroom mirror . . . I could see how I was going to stand out too. For good or ill. I too would have a hard time escaping. As my beloved rector had told me in seminary, being ordained is not about serving God perfectly but about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall. “You probably won’t be much worse than other people,” he said, “and you certainly won’t be any better, but you will have to let people look at you. You will have to let them see you as you are.”

Her story grasps something of what we hear in the opening verses of Ephesians 4:

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness.

There is something in that “prisoner of the Lord” bit. Something close to what the prophet Jeremiah talked about when he referred to the “fire in his bones” and his experience

that he could do nothing other than what God had called him to do. Taylor expressed it as a feeling that she could not escape.

We are not all of us are called to be preachers and pastors, but we Christians are all called to be disciples, to contribute in some way to the building up of the body of Christ. We are each us filled with the Spirit and empowered with certain gifts. During the season of Lent this year we will examine just these issues under the theme “Make Our Work Worthy.”

According to scholar Richard Ward, in the opening chapters of the Letter of Ephesians,

God is at work in Christ . . . revealing, choosing, adopting, sacrificing, and blessing in order to bring differing communities together into a new, unified body in the face of pronounced and pervasive evil. The claim is bold and remarkable, that through the death and resurrection of Christ warring religious cultures, passionately divided by heritage, traditions, moral codes, and behaviors, have collided and now converged into a newly created order, a community that knows no barriers of race, class, or gender.

And where our text picks up today is in the practical advice for how to make this new diverse community work. How to bring all these different people together and unify them for the common goal and purpose of God.

This sort of unity is not easy. Seven times in verses four through six the author emphasizes the number one – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.

This emphasis on the number one compelled me to listen to the classic U2 song “One,” from their album *Achtung Baby*. Courtney read those lyrics earlier as our Contemporary Lesson. That powerful and moving song reflects on the difficulty and the grace in struggling for unity.

Did I ask too much?
More than a lot.
You gave me nothing,
Now it's all I got
We're one
But we're not the same
Well we
Hurt each other
Then we do it again

Through the disappointment, the need for forgiveness, and the appeals to love, the song returns again and again to this emphasis on being one and supporting each other:

One life
With each other
Sisters
Brothers

One life
But we're not the same
We get to
Carry each other
Carry each other
One

In similar fashion, the author of Ephesians proclaims that the calling of Christians is to bear one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit. We can only bear one another in love if we are humble and gentle, aware of our own limitations. In Barbara Brown Taylor's story, she is made directly aware of hers. Her mentor says, "You probably won't be much worse than other people and you certainly won't be any better." Imagine adding that to the litany of the ordination service!

According to the author of Ephesians, humility, gentleness, patience, and love are requirements of a worthy life. A worthy life requires that we be aware of our limitations -- we cannot go it alone; we need other people and they need us.

Humility is the virtue of having a proper understanding of one's place in relationship to others. Roman Catholic scholar Luke Timothy Johnson defines it as "placing oneself appropriately within the life of the community."

It is not just practical to be aware of our limitations, but deeply spiritual. If we attempt to do everything, then we deny others their opportunities for discipleship. Ministry is not the role of the pastor. Ministry is the work of all the saints, all the members of the church, which is why every week I state in my opening words that we are all ministers. Each of us has our own gifts, our own calling to live.

Barbara Brown Taylor's mentor also told her, "you will have to let people look at you. You will have to let them see you as you are." Her priestly ministry meant being visible as she lived her discipleship. This is what we call "witnessing." And, once again, it is not the sole task of the ordained, but of the church as a whole, as a community. We, as a congregation, are to visibly be the presence of God.

The calling to which we have all been called is to be the Christ to all the world. We cannot be the Christ—God's visible presence on the earth—if people do not see us and experience us. What the world should see is a diverse group of people who are connected through love and peace. And then this love and peace overflow, taking in more and more people, touching more and more lives, so that those around cannot help but take notice. And what they end up seeing is not just a motley crew but God's Spirit radiating through us.

Nor is our calling limited to what occurs within these walls, or through the programs of this congregation, or the activities covered by our annual budget. You live out your calling every day in your home, your school, your neighborhood, your workplace, that community organization you volunteer for, that person that you encounter in the store. In order to get some sense of the breadth of this congregation's reach, today I want you to take the orange insert in your bulletin, the one about the backpacks. On the back of that, I'd like you to write down where you work or what school you attend and also any organizations you volunteer for or serve on the board of. Then turn those into the offering plate or in the nametag basket in the parlor. I'll collect them and later this Lent I'll put together a display of how expansive our

reach is into the community. It will be interesting to learn.

I, Scott Jones, am a disciple of Jesus. I committed myself to this way of life in 1979 when I was five years old. And almost immediately I sensed the particular and peculiar calling that God had in store for me. It was not something I could escape, even if I had wanted to, and even those times that I tried. I do not live my calling as a duty or an obligation. Nor was it simply a choice of career or profession. For me, it is the path of discipleship, the way to fill my life with meaning and blessing, and it is, for me, the presence, the power, and the glory of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that “the call to serve God is first and last the call to be fully human.” What is your calling? Your passion? That thing which holds you prisoner and you cannot escape? If you have not yet discerned your calling, then this Lent I invite you to listen for the Spirit guiding you. If you know your calling and are already working at it, then I invite you to ponder how to make your work worthy.