

Sermon Proper 9 B
St. Johns' Episcopal Church
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When I was a child in Catholic schools, the nuns and priests would often talk about vocations. Coming from the Latin word, ‘to call,’ the term ‘‘vocation’’ meant for us a call to be a priest, if you were a boy, or a nun, if you were a girl. Actually, I’m delighted that God called me to be **both** a priest and a nun, but that’s another story! The point is that people often understood ‘‘call’’ in a very limited way. We certainly did as children. We thought a ‘‘call’’ was an invitation to become a religious professional, to be an ‘‘insider’’ in the church.

But a ‘‘call’’ is not limited to a select few. In fact, a ‘‘call’’ has been issued to each one of us in our baptism. It is not reserved for religious leaders. God calls whomever God wants. And God sends whomever God wants to proclaim the message. And those whom Jesus called and sent were not religious professionals either. They were ordinary people, sent out to do what Jesus had done- tell people that God is doing a new thing in the world and in people’s ordinary, everyday lives, helping people recognize God already at work in the world, called to help heal the brokenness of the world.

So, just as it is a mistake to think that a call from God is a call to be a religious professional, so also, it is a mistake to think that a call from God is a call to spend all our time in church doing churchy things. Whomever God calls, God sends. Sends outside the church walls to a world on the doorstep and down the street and over hills and over the highways.

So God sends people to speak a word that may be rejected. We hear this morning about the rejection of Jesus by his friends and neighbors in Nazareth. “Who does he think he is saying all this stuff?” they ask themselves. “Where does he come off?” A further sign of their rejection is their calling him “son of Mary.” That’s an insult. In Jesus’ culture you were called by your father’s name not your mother’s. So Jesus knew rejection first hand. Serious enough that he left the hills of Nazareth and his neighbors and family and moved to Capernaum on the edge of the Sea of Galilee to preach from there. Sometimes I picture that long walk that Jesus took along the river beds from Nazareth to Capernaum. What did it feel like for him to walk away from unbelief, to leave his home to find a place where people could hear him? It must have seemed a very long walk.

Jesus also warns those whom he sends that they may be turned away from the doors upon which they knock. But, to quote Mother Teresa, success is not the point. Faithfulness is the point. Faithfulness to the

message is the point. Being a witness is the point. The rest is up to God. In our goal-oriented, success-driven culture we need to be constantly reminded that we are not promised success.

Actually, what we are often promised is rejection! But, we are still sent and asked simply to be faithful to God's message. What will that mean for us in this new millennium of Christianity? How do we speak to a largely unchurched, secular population? What language do we borrow to bring people the good news?

And what are we sent to say? We are told to say that the time is short. There is an urgency about this message. Bishop Theuner, the former Bishop of New Hampshire, preaches as though you only have today to hear the word and to respond to it. His sermons have no useless phrases, no complicated extraneous controversies, no distractions, no fluff. He lays out the word of God. He announces that the reign of God is breaking in upon you. He asks you: "What will you do in response?" He once told his clergy that he never wanted a person to come to an Episcopal church in New Hampshire and not hear the good news preached. Why is there such urgency in the Bishop's preaching? Because the time really is short. Who knows when we will be asked to give an account of our calling? Who knows how

many people need to hear the good news of God's unconditional love **today**?

And Jesus' disciples are to heal. In their day this was exorcism, casting out demons. What demonic forces are we called to cast out? What forces today obstruct the work of God?

We are also told that we need to go in haste- no bread, no baggage. What is our bread? What may we need to relinquish? What is our baggage? What do we need to leave behind as we set forth on this journey?

We have God's call. But now we come to the big leap. What makes someone **accept** this call? This is a call and a mission that may well cost us everything. As you look back on your life, where have you gotten the courage and determination to make some of your most important life decisions? We have all made courageous decisions but they didn't always seem particularly heroic at the time. That is only in hindsight. In the doing it feels like: "of course." This is the next step for me. I cannot NOT do this. In order to be truly who I am I need to make this choice. Put in religious language, I need to accept my call. I need to go where I am sent.

I had a friend who had gone all the way through seminary, convinced that she should be a minister because she wanted to heal people. In her last

semester of divinity school it became clear to her that she was indeed called to heal people; but as a physician not as a minister.

She hemmed and she hawed. And then she made her decision. She went back to college to take chemistry and biology and she racked up yet another set of student loans for medical school and now she is gloriously happy as a physician. She was called and sent. And she went, no matter the cost.

Acceptance of a call, willingness to be sent flows out of our love affair with God. As the fruit of love, we speak a heartfelt "yes." I challenge us all to pray with the word "yes" and live into the question! Start with the answer and see what question God decides to ask of you! It's mighty risky, I'll warn you right now, but the freedom that comes from starting with "yes" is unbelievable!

So, what are the next steps? How can we hear God's call? Deepen your intimate life with God from whom your call arises. How can we bring God's message? Open yourselves to conversion. You have to **believe** the message you are sent to announce. How can we dare to do this? Rely on the strength and the faith of the community. And then go where you are sent and say what you are given to say. About love. About grace. About forgiveness. About peace. About reconciliation. About freedom.

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.