

This Sunday's texts:

Judges 4:4-10

1 Corinthians 12:4-7

Mark 10:42-45

Calling and Gift

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The holy gospel for this morning comes to us from the gospel of Mark, the tenth chapter:

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, allow us to hear and learn and be inspired from your word this day. Help us to know your voice and to follow. In Jesus' name. Amen

When I received the congregational profile of Saint Timothy's a couple of years ago in Tucson, one of the things I read was that in 2010 Pastor Dan, Bishop Dan led you through a very intentional shift from being a program congregation to a discipleship congregation. In many respects, that is a very challenging thing to do. In all honesty, it takes many years to do it. This intrigued me. It intrigued me because I also knew that the model at that time that was immediately used was a 3DM model which uses huddles and my friend, Bob Rognlien had been involved in that for many years. I had gone to a number of classes and even received some coaching for about six months myself on 3DM. I like the model, but I also knew that the model had some challenges and it was apparent in the course of Saint Tim's own history that a number of people really were blessed and liked the model, but then, there was a shift and today we have grow groups really instead of huddle groups.

We're still asking the question if the Great Commission of Jesus is to go and make disciples, how do we do it? How do we become disciples? How do we make disciples?

I know a number of Christians who think of themselves as Christians, but not as disciples. And if you take that a step further, they may even say that they are disciples, but certainly *not* apostles. Because we want to take that title of "Apostle" and leave it on The Twelve. You know, the eleven, plus one later - twelve. Right? You're shaking your head in agreement. Yeah.

So in Tucson, as I was doing ministry in the community and as we were building relationships with other churches, including [gasp] non-Lutheran churches, we got to know some amazing church

leaders. One of them was called Apostle Warren Anderson, an amazing African American leader in the community. I don't know how tall he is, but it's like really tall. Played basketball for the University of Arizona back in the day and had status in the community in part because he was an apostle. So I said, "Well, what is that mean to you? I know what it means to me because I'm confused. But what does it mean to *you*?" I found out that a pastor in that community, in that denomination, was the leader of a congregation, but an apostle was a leader in the congregation and beyond the congregation. They had influence that they were asked to bring to the larger denomination. That is, they were *sent* from their local church into the larger church to continue to spread the influence of the gospel.

I want to say to you when the Bible says we are ambassadors of Christ, it says of you that You. Are. An. Apostle. You are one sent by God to have an influence in God's name. You're going to wrestle with that a little bit. You're going to argue in the back of your mind whether or not that's fair or true or whatever. That's okay. It's especially okay if you want to embrace the word "ambassador" instead of "apostle." I'll go with that all day long, as long as you understand that you are indeed chosen and gifted by God as one who is sent to represent him in the world. I say that so strongly because I know many who doubt their ability to do that. Doubt their qualifications to do that. Think Pastor, you don't know me. You're out of your mind. You're wrong.

In the life of our church, historically, there's been a question about women in leadership. You probably don't know this, but my wife's aunt, by marriage, was one of the first women pastors ordained in our former church body, that being the ALC, I think back then, if I'm remembering correctly. She kind of was a pioneer, actually was a missionary to Brazil, Portuguese-speaking Brazil. That always impresses me because I'm not a language guy. We discover also then in our reading, as we've been doing our readings. We've been seeing the horrific journey of the judges, as the people of Israel are faithful, and then get unfaithful, and then cry out to God and God raises up a judge, and they have a period of peace, and then they get unfaithful again and they get in trouble, and then they cry out to God, and this cycle just repeats itself. But in that cycle, we learn about Deborah.

Deborah is a female leader of the people of Israel, God's people, starting out as a prophet, that is a spokesperson for God, and so we learned as we read, even just today's lesson here at church, that Deborah goes to the military leader and says God says do this. Wow! That's taking charge. The military leader is hesitant. There's a little hint as to why he's hesitant. They're going up

against an army that has numerous chariots. They're a well-armed enemy and that leader hems and haws, and then he says this. Deborah, if you'll go with me, I'll go. My initial reaction is to think did he just make a mistake? Did he just think that it was Debra telling him to go? Because Deborah was a prophet. Deborah wasn't speaking for herself. Deborah was speaking for God, who was saying go and I'll go with you. But he wanted Deborah and Deborah, being a brave and bold leader, said sure I'll go with you. Bad idea on your part because you're not going to get the credit for this, but sure I'll go with you. And they go. And they defeat the army. And the text says there were forty years of peace. How? Under Deborah's leadership, because of the calling and blessing of God and because of the obedience to God that she led the people of Israel into.

This female leader thing is not new. It's happened throughout history, especially as gifted women of God follow the calling that God puts on their life and do what God asked them to do. God's people are blessed through them.

The calling of God is sometimes something we struggle with. Some of you have recently heard about my journey. When Marilyn met me, I was working as the director of audio/visual for the Los Angeles branch of the Augsburg Publishing House. I had earned my degree in Christian Education from Azusa Pacific University. My desire was to be a volunteer youth director in the church and to earn a living doing something else. At the time, I was actually doing that job and applying to be in the Los Angeles sheriff's department. Then something interesting happened. Marilyn's brother, Jan, who was just finishing seminary and on his way to be a missionary in Cameroon, came to Los Angeles and visited us. He said to me, "Jim, you can go to seminary and not be a pastor when you're done." I had been resisting the call. I'd already been told by a number of people that I should consider going to seminary, but I was thinking [hems, haws] no. But the idea of going to seminary, studying scripture, and learning theology, excited me. So when I chose to go to seminary for that four-year degree past my bachelor's, I was fully intending not to be a pastor when I was done. And through that journey, God made it clear that I should do it and trust in him and he would take care of me.

I want to tell you one other thing about the call of God. Listen carefully: *you cannot do it*. Did you hear me? I was right in my thinking when I said I cannot do it. I can't do it. You can't do it. Even Jim Bangsund can't do it. Unless God does it through us. Following God is a faith walk. It's a faith journey in which we say, "God, I'm going to obey you. I'm going to make myself available to you. I'm

going to allow you to do through me what it is you want to do.” I doubt very much Deborah wanted to go to war against that well-armed army, but she heard God's call and she knew God's promise that he would be with them as they went. And when we know the promise of the presence of God is going to be with us, we also know that we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength. Can I get an amen?

So when you question your calling, instead of looking in the mirror and seeing your weaknesses, instead of looking at your past and seeing mistakes you've made or failures that you've had, instead of looking at yourself, look at the one who is calling you. Our confidence is not in ourselves. Our confidence is in God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We're called to remember that God doesn't call the equipped. He equips the called. What I want you to understand about that, too, is – Jim, don't laugh when I say this, please be kind; Pastor Judy, don't laugh when I say this - when I finished seminary, I wasn't equipped. I really wasn't equipped, except for what was right there on that first day and then, as I journeyed, God continued to equip me. As God expanded the call and shifted the call, God continued to equip and he does until this very day. I don't think I have what it will take to be the leader of St Timothy's. I think God will give me what I need each day as I follow his call to lead St Timothy's. Do you get the difference? It's about who God is. It's about his faithfulness. It's the same for our Sunday School leaders, our choir director. It's the same with all of us. It's about God calling and equipping his people to do what he wants his church to do and be together in the world as a witness to the world.

Someone was asking me, “Well, don't you think we need to build St Timothy's up a little bit before we start figuring out how we're going to be engaged in the community?” Yes. No. Well, which is it? Well, yes, St Timothy's, we need to be built up. In fact, we need to build each other up, but one of the ways that happens is by going. And one of the ways we prevent that from happening is by *not* going. It's in the act of obedience that God equips, shapes, molds, and strengthens us to be the people he needs us to be, to do what he calls us to do.

There is a text that has long been in my heart and soul: 1 Corinthians 12:7. It says “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”¹ There are two really, really important truths in that one little verse. First off, it's in a context and the context is to say this. We all have different gifts. We all have different abilities, but we serve the same Lord. We all have different

¹ ESV

gifts, but God is the one who is at work in all of them. That means we do different things and we're gifted for different things. But the first thing about this text that you need to know is it says "to each." Brenda, does that include you? Why yes, it does. It includes each one of us, even Sam. Each one of you. Michael, you too. The question is: are you on board yet? That's kind of what I'm asking because most of the people I'm preaching to aren't on board yet. Most? Maybe, that's an exaggeration. Most of the people I know doubt whether or not God has given them a gift. They think "Well, that's interesting, Pastor. Just not me." What I want to say to you what is clear in that verse, in that promise is you have a gift from God. Maybe more than one.

There, in the confession that we've been doing on Wednesday nights, we say "I believe it. Amen." I believe it; it is so. I'm not going to ask you to say it out loud, in case you don't want to, but I'm going to ask you, in your mind, to say "you have a gift from God." Say in your mind, "I believe it. Amen." I'm hoping that God will continue, by his Holy Spirit and through this community, to convince you of that truth because there's a very important second point in this verse. *Why* has God gifted *you*? For the common good. Ever since Abraham, God's intent has been to choose and bless people, so that he could bless the world through them. God's intention is to use you and the gift he gives you to be a blessing to others, so that the common, that the community is elevated because of the way God works through each one of us. A part of the reason, thinking about that, coming in this morning and seeing most of the choir already here, seeing the doors already open, seeing the Sunday school getting all ready, part of that was the evidence that God is at work here in this place, doing amazing things through amazingly gifted people. Some of them don't even acknowledge that their gifted, but God is *still* using them and still blessing us through them.

It also said, in another place, earlier, in case you don't like that verse. In 1 Corinthians 7:7, it says each of you has your own gift from God. So those of you that are still arguing that point in your heads, I just want to make sure that you understand. Just like the Old Testament leader wasn't arguing with Deborah, they were arguing with God. If you're arguing this question, you're not arguing with me. You're arguing with God who says he's giving you a gift.

So discipleship, to an amazing extent, is about hearing God's calling in your life and using it. Using it to be that blessing. Using it to be that influence. And because we have a hard time seeing it in one another, one of the important things about the community of faith is that when you see gifts in other people, it's a good idea to tell them because, much to your surprise you will discover, when

you tell them, that they don't know it yet, until they hear it from different people. I had been told at least four or five different times that I should go to seminary and it wasn't until Marilyn's brother said it and let me off the hook of being a pastor that I was willing to follow that call. Speak to one another. Encourage one another. Tell one another what you see in one another. Affirm the gifts and thank them when they use them in our community. Let them know that you can see God in them. What an amazing, amazing affirmation, because it isn't about building up each other's ego. It's about building up each other's faith, so that they can see the promise of God and they can see that you see the promise of God at work in them. Then you ask, "But what does God want me to do?" And my response to that? On the one hand is I have no idea and you're thinking "yeah, me neither." But I do know that it's to build up his people. I do know that it's to build up the witness of his people in the world. I do know that it's for the common good.

As we listen to our gospel today, we hear something very important. "Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.'"² These aren't gifts so that we can control and be superior. They're, in fact, gifts that we can serve one another. "[W]hoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."³ The great reversal of God's Kingdom. "Not so with you." Your gifts are so that you can serve. Your gifts are so that you can build up, comfort, and encourage one another within the body of Christ and as the body of Christ, the world around us. And Jesus is the example. "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."⁴ Brothers and sisters in Christ, we're being asked to do the very same thing that Jesus did, to serve, to follow his example, to live it out. And if you know some people, the annoying ones, you know, the loud obnoxious ones, neighbors, coworkers, then serve them as Christ has served you. Then look to the one who calls you, rather than the one to whom you are called, and serve them as you would serve him because that's our calling in faith. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are gifted for the common good, so that we can lift one another up. Discover your place and then celebrate the goodness of God, as you discover the truth that God chooses, yes, even you to be the servant of the most high God and it is the honor of our lives to do so. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Mark 10:42-43a

³ Mark 10:43b-44

⁴ Mark 10:45