

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost- October 21, 2007

Scripture lessons: Isaiah 42:5-7 & II Corinthians 12:9-10

LISTENING FOR THE CALL

Certain things just fit. You work a jigsaw puzzle and find piece after piece that join perfectly to make the big picture. You shop for shoes and finally find the pair that slips “just right” onto your feet. You sit outside with a little one on a clear summer night, look together into the sky, and can’t help but sing, “Twinkle, twinkle, little star.” You go to a baseball game, stand up for the seventh inning stretch, and can’t help but sing, “Take me out to the ball game.” You celebrate the anniversary of a loved one’s entry into this world, see the cake and candles come out, and can’t help but sing, “Happy birthday to you.” Certain things just fit.

Our Christian faith has a special word for the “fit” God has in mind for us. That word is “calling”. What kind of fit is our “calling”? Today’s first Scripture from Isaiah speaks to it: “I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.”

Our calling is from God. It’s a purpose God takes us by the hand and prepares us for. It’s the purpose of serving others, of being “a light to the nations”.

As a genuine fit, our calling isn’t something laid on us by God as an awkward or painful burden. It’s a drawing together of talents and passions God has given to us with needs and hurts in God’s world we’re especially equipped to meet and to heal. Finding and living out our calling isn’t a burden. It’s our fulfillment. It joins our particular pieces with the pieces of the world we’re meant to bring together. Made for that fit, we find true satisfaction.

It’s worth noting that in the Bible the first question God asks is a call question. Adam and Eve are in the Garden of Eden. They do the one thing God tells them not to do. Ashamed, they go off and hide. God calls out to them, “Where are you?”

God’s dismayed because God has made them for genuine purpose. God has created them for a particularly awesome fit within the life of God’s whole creation, yet they’ve run away from it. God can’t find them to do what they’re made to do.

Adam and Eve, so to speak, go off of God’s “fitness” program. Staying with God’s call is the way to maintain our spiritual health and strength. If we neglect or turn away from it, we become pale and weak.

Unfortunately, it seems that we frequently think the exact opposite. Somehow we get the idea that finding and staying faithful to God’s call means that we’ll end up burned out. But Christian writer J.D. Ward has it right when he says that the place of God’s call is “the broken place in the world where, when we offer our healing, we’re healed in return.”

Finding and living our call isn’t about getting burned out. It’s about moving to the place where when we offer our healing we get healed, too. Granted, we may need to be sandpapered a bit before we get into the right place. Sandpaper shapes a piece of wood so that it fits where it needs to go. Our suffering is often the sandpaper that shapes us for the place of our particular call.

We ask ourselves, “Where have I been hurt or where have I failed, so that I’ve finally had to give up on my own devices and depend truly on God?” The sandpaper of those sufferings can shape us for the place where we best can offer healing to others that in turn heals us.

I once met a man who worked tirelessly with young people in one of the poorest and toughest sections of Washington, D.C. He used his own home as a place where kids could come and find safety when their homes were torn up by violence and drug abuse. He’d go to court for the kids; he’d bring them to church; he’d help them with their homework. He was always there for them.

I asked him, “Don’t you get tired? Don’t you ever wish you had a more “normal” life?” He shook his head, “I know what these kids are going through. As a child, I grew up with violence

and drug abuse in my home. Thank God, God got me through it. Now every time I help one of these kids, I feel life rushing into me.”

That man had found his calling, his fit. He’d been shaped for it through his own suffering. Sandpapered by it, he’d been moved into the broken place where he could best offer his healing and be healed in return. Which hurts or failures has God pulled us through? Remembering them can lead to the place of our call. Once there, we can offer healing to others that heals us, too.

But maybe we think we’re not good enough. Maybe we think we have to be a saint like Mother Teresa before we can take seriously the idea of God’s call. If so, we need to open up the Bible again. We need to consider once more the kinds of people God calls throughout the Scriptures to serve God’s purposes. Noah drank too much, Abraham’s faith was erratic, Isaac was a daydreamer, Jacob told lots of lies, Joseph was a daddy’s boy, Moses stuttered, Rahab was a prostitute, Gideon was fearful, Samson was a womanizer, David committed adultery and murder, Elijah was suicidal, Jeremiah complained bitterly about his call, Jonah ran away from God, the Samaritan woman was married five times, Jesus’ twelve disciples were all thickheaded, Peter, James, and John fell asleep when Jesus needed them most, Peter denied Jesus three times, and, last but not least, Lazarus was dead.

Despite all their shortcomings, these people responded to God’s call. They took up God’s fitness program. We listen to the stories of their faithfulness in the midst of their many imperfections and take heart. We see that whatever mistakes or wrongs we’ve done, whatever flaws or weaknesses we have, whatever steps we have or haven’t taken in our spiritual journey it doesn’t matter- God stays with us. God still calls to us. God keeps working to make us fit partners with God in healing creation.

But maybe our life’s too much of a blur. Maybe its volume is turned up so high that we figure we *can’t* see or hear God’s call. Maybe the barriers created by our culture’s busyness and noise lead us to think that we have to slow to a crawl or wait for our nest to empty or settle into our retirement days completely before we’ll have the time and quiet to listen for God. The fact remains that God’s call, God’s fit, the broken places where we can offer our healing and be healed in return, are often right in front of us even in our loudest and most hectic days.

Preacher Kim Engelmann tells this story about a woman in her church. She was a very competent, successful, and busy person. Her life’s plate was piled high with many significant and well-established activities, but one day while searching in the stacks of her public library she stumbled upon a homeless woman lying on the floor. It turned out that this person had been around for awhile, but no one knew much about her or what to do with her except make sure that she left the library each night.

It wasn’t that this parishioner had nothing else to do. She was preoccupied with many other important things, yet still felt that God was nudging her, calling her to reach out to *this* homeless one. She asked her new and unkempt acquaintance if she’d like to come to her house to get cleaned up a bit. The woman said she’d like that very much.

She ended up staying for several days and the church woman found out much more about the homeless woman’s situation. She did have a family with whom she’d once been well-connected. After a few phone calls, some welcome words of long-awaited forgiveness, and a bus ticket in her hand she was headed back home. Her family lived in another state and had been worried about and looking for her for many months. Thanks to a Christian woman’s faithful response to an on-the-spot call from God, this lost woman and her family were soon re-united. The one who had answered the call didn’t feel burned out by it, but only enriched. She had fit into a broken place and everyone was made stronger.

Opportunities for spontaneous and courageous outreach like that don’t always work out so well, of course, but they’re still worth looking and listening for. They keep us open to the truth that God’s call frequently can come to us as an interruption to our busy and otherwise worthwhile schedules. For God calls us not only in the midst of our imperfections, but also in times when we’re not perfectly prepared to listen. God calls us not only when we’re deliberately ready to

hear like in prayer, meditation, and worship, but also when we're looking for a library book and run into a homeless person, too. The great Christian spiritual director, Henri Nouwen, once wrote: "I used to think that my work kept getting interrupted, until I realized that the interruptions were my work." When we listen for God's call we stay open to divine interruptions.

That's always a big challenge because our tendency is strong to listen selectively. We adults may not always recognize this in ourselves, but we see it easily in our children. When we call they seem to know instinctively why we call, and they listen accordingly. They tune in, for instance, when we call to play and tune out when we call to work. "Time to go to the movies!" gets heard. "Time to clean your room!" gets tuned out. Could I have been that way when I was a child? Heaven forbid.

Yet it's a tendency we don't necessarily outgrow. In listening for God's call, we can hear it as an unwanted interruption to our already full schedule or as a reminder of suffering in our past that we'd rather just forget or as an invitation into something we don't feel morally worthy to do or as a pull into something we're afraid we don't have the gifts for. If we hear it in any of those ways, we're tempted to tune out.

But when we do we forget, as Isaiah says, that God takes us by the hand and prepares us for the work God has for us to do. We forget, as Paul says in today's second Scripture, that Christ's power is made perfect in our weakness. We don't have to have the time already carved out. We don't have to be completely healed from our past sufferings. We don't have to be a saint like Mother Teresa. We don't have to have the gifts for it already in hand.

I think of what I'm doing now- preaching. I do believe it's an important part of God's call upon my life, but when I think back to the first times I ever spoke in public I wonder how I could possibly be doing this now. The first signs were not good.

I'm in a required speech class in college. I'm a minute and a half into a 5-minute videotaped talk that's the only one we have to give for the course. All of a sudden, I *completely* forget what I'm going to say. I stand there for at least another full minute and a half saying nothing at all, looking mostly towards the ceiling and then towards the floor, shifting back and forth from one foot to the other, trying desperately to remember my speech without looking too much like an idiot. Eventually, I remember, finish, and sit down.

Later, the professor reviews the tape with me. He focuses only on the parts when I was actually speaking. They lead him to wonder seriously if I have a birth defect. He points out a seemingly spastic movement of my right hand that was going on the whole time I talked. (*Demonstrate the movement.*) I assured him it wasn't the result of any congenital defect that I knew of, but the videotape didn't lie.

I think, too, of how I was in the only preaching class I had in seminary. We had to preach only two very short sermons for it. I got through the first one, 3-to-5 minutes long, without much problem, but the second one, 8-10 minutes long, was almost more than I could bear. About halfway through, I came this close to giving it up and sitting down. That wasn't because I couldn't remember what I was going to say. It was because I had absolutely no conviction about what I was going to say. My faith was so totally up in the air. I didn't know who I was. The best I could do was to go through the motions.

But in those times and since God has taken me by the hand. God has led me to a place where I can preach now without forgetting what I'm saying, without my hand going like this while I'm saying it, and, above all, without feeling like I should sit down because I'm only faking it.

God calls us all to join with God in the healing of creation; God prepares us for the particular work God has for us to do; and God heals and makes us stronger as we do it. Counting on that, we listen for God, answer faithfully, and find our life's fulfillment. Amen.