



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Preparing for the Journey: Who Is Coming Along?

Jeff Japinga

Sunday, June 2, 2024

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ephesians 4:1-6

I found myself on the weekday commuter train, bound for New York City, pressed against the window, blocked in by two men who, both by dress and by demeanor, seemed to be more suited for a limo than this cattle car for the masses. Before iPhones and earbuds and all manner of ways to closer yourself to the outside world...

Try as I might, and I am confessing here, the op-ed page of the New York Times was no match for their conversation, which, in the snippets I heard, centered around what sounded like the annual promotion day at their financial firm. And whether one of them, or perhaps both, would get the golden ticket.

There was, in appropriately hushed tones, words I mostly couldn't hear, save for the occasional "tens of millions" when one of them raised his voice for emphasis. All bravado, until that one moment, when the man in the

charcoal grey pinstriped suit turned to the man in the navy-blue pinstriped suit and said, in words I could hear, "But what if they don't think I am worth of partner? What then? What will happen to me?"

And for the longest time, the two men were simply silent, the grey suited man's words hanging unanswered in the air. Until he broke the silence himself. "I'll be ruined."

Last week, Trinity Sunday, we thought about who God is, and how that makes a difference for us. This week, Scriptures shines its light on you, and what it is that finally defines you, forms you, shapes you, as a person.

What makes you worthy. And who tells you that.

Those aren't bad questions for a Commencement Sunday, even if I have no intention of providing our graduates with yet another commencement address. You can thank me later...

Or to ask at the beginning of Pride Month, or on a week with a cacophony of difficult headlines. Or even to ask collectively, of a congregation considering its future in a world where church futures aren't attracting all that many investors.

Who are you? What is your worth? And how do you know?

Truth is: we ride the trains, drive the highways, walk the paths of a world that ties our worth to all sorts of measurements and realities: sometimes we know this unquenchable passion, our mission in life, we say; sometimes the awfulness and brutality of life robs us of any spark that makes us feel alive; sometimes our business card tell us who we are, or the size of our bank account, or the college admittance letter. Sometimes it's simply that small, often critical voice in your head, the one that tells you're not enough, haven't done enough.

Whatever it is for you, whatever you understand makes you worthy, or not, Paul seemingly suddenly decides to bring God into the equation:

I beg you, Paul writes, to live a life worthy...of what?...worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

The calling to which you have been called.

It's an odd, church word we use, isn't it: calling. We infuse it with all sorts of meaning, we have a PNC who, in time, will issue a call to a new pastor for this congregation. Called, we insist, not just by Westminster, but by God. With expectations to match.

But too often, what we are really saying, what we hear in Paul's words, what it really seems to mean, is that our actions, our accomplishments, the way the world sees us, that must be how God sees us too.

And so we measure our pastors, called by God, by their sermons and care, and our churches by their budgets and their attendance, and ourselves by what we do, too. Our calling.

Don't get me wrong – what we do, how we do it, the impact it has – huge. Essential. So many of you have made, are making, so much difference in this world. I'm right here to say thank you.

But we often make this sense of calling a requirement, an accomplishment, an obligation, rather than something else Paul might have really had in mind. Now where calling ends, but where calling starts.

Not in what you do, but who you are.

Jeremiah was a wild-eyed, hard-nosed prophet speaking into times that could hardly have been worse. Jerusalem had been overrun by the Babylonians, the Temple reduced to rubble, and much of the Jewish nation to which Jeremiah's prophecy is addressed carted off to exile in Babylon. These people had no resume, no currency, and

every reason to be bitter. And for most of his 52 chapters, Jeremiah essentially says, “You had it coming. You relied on yourself, and here’s what you got for it.”

But here and there, Jeremiah also began to imagine something different, something of a radical new hope for God’s people: a new standard, an inward transformation. A “law within them” he calls it, an identity “written on the heart” rather than on a stone, or a resume.

In Jeremiah’s vision, what you do is important, to be sure; but who you are is not in what you do, no matter what you do, nor is it in how you feel about yourself, no matter how you feel.

It is not about the people to whom you belong, or the one you love. Not the accomplishments to which you can point, nor the tragedies which may have befallen you. Who you are, in the end, is not a matter of psychology or sociology or economy, but of theology.

A people who do the right thing not for the personal gain or benefit they hope to reap; but because they know who they really are. In God’s eyes. Because it’s written on their hearts.

And that idea – Jeremiah’s vision – that earning God’s favor is not the goal of your story, not even your calling –

is why Paul's deepest request in all of his letters – the one we read this morning- is not one of fidelity to a specific doctrine or belief – do this or do that, and you will be saved – but to a soaring reality that goes to the very core of our identity and our being:

I beg you...I beg you...to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

To live a life worth of the identity you have had from the very beginning.

To be sure, there are expectations here, requirements. The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker; the CEO, the transitional senior pastor, the unemployed, the retired, the newly minted graduate.

Many of you have invested your lives in extraordinary ways, with extraordinary impact, and that is to be celebrated.

But when Paul begs you to live a life worthy of the calling to which you've been called, he is not demanding that you do a job well, but rather is inviting you to live a life well...with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; to join as Christ's body.

To bear each other's burdens and share each other's joys; to be near to each other in our suffering and joy; to seek justice for those who long for it, and for someone who will stand alongside watching for God, listening for God, acting for God, fashioned as Christ's hands and feet, wherever you are, at any and every moment, not to earn God's favor. But to live out God's identity already within us, and what Jesus' saving work has cemented. For the building up of the body of Christ.

I found this whole sense of identity, and its origin, profoundly expressed this week in the words of our artist-in-residence, Wendy Brown-Báez. As we celebrate Wendy today, I invite you to hear her words now in light of Paul's invitation to you, to us:

We do not journey alone

Do this, he said, in remembrance of me
take this cup and remember that you are
sons and daughters of God, and so
are your brothers and sisters.
Take this bread and remember you
are hungry for justice.

He said take up your cross
and he meant accompany me in
pointing out he harms even if it means
you will be killed for it. He said give away

all you think you own and follow me.

He said stand up and walk, your faith has healed you. He gave us a map to the center of our own luminous Divinity, he said greater things than these you will do.

There were outcasts at his table, women who made his meals and sat by his feet, disciples who would eventually know what he was talking about.

And there is me, pilgrim and seeker, looking around to see who might be beside me.

He is in my hands sharing bread, whether at my table or the tables of the poor. He is in my feet when I walk into and out of a prison with a pile of poetry handouts.

He is in my thoughts when I pray, and even when I doubt my prayers are heard.

He is in my heart with its determination to be a healing

presence and to bless the sorrows and the joys.

He is my soul opening to the world that is under an indictment of greed and abuse, yet still I offer deep attention and simple acts of kindness.

He is my poem exulting in the good. He is my breath, a rhythm of Inhalation and Exhalation with the One.

He is in my final days and my golden years and the company I keep as I wind my way home.

I be you, to live a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

I don't know where this journey you're on, that we're on together, I don't know exactly where it will take you, and take us together. I expect bumps, potholes, and detours.

But I do know where it starts: with whom God has declared you to be, and written on your heart – and on the hearts of those we travel this journey with, and for, upholding, supporting, nurturing, so that, together, we all

might know ourselves, and know and see each other, as worthy of this calling to which we have been called.

I beg you...in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.