THE CALL

Pilgrim Church, Duluth March 8, 1981 Elizabeth Oettinger

Last Sunday, as most of you will remember, Shep gave a sermon about sacrifice. And, among other things, he remarked on how attractive sacrifice and sacrificial lifestyles seem to us when seen in others. Even when we don't wholeheartedly agree with their beliefs, we cannot help but be drawn to a Mother Theresa, an Archbishop Romero, a Martin Luther King, Jr. We feel an instinctual pull towards anyone who will voluntarily risk their lives and/or fortunes for the sake of others, for the sake of what they perceive to be right. We envy their faith, the seeming certainty we assume they have of God's presence with them, guiding them, telling them what to do, giving them the courage to risk and to sacrifice. And I would assert, there is a place in each of us--perhaps a larger place in some than in others--but at least a germ of a spot in each of us which wishes that we could be like that, which wants us to be transformed into a model of seemingly selfless heroism.

We sense that in order to effect such a transformation, we need greater faith, or perhaps a different kind of faith. Whichever, we know that whatever it is we need, we don't have it now, and in what one of the best constructed paradoxes of human thought, we continue by assuring ourselves that we cannot have that kind or depth of spiritual experience. Do you all remember the book or the movie, Catch 22? Well what Catch 22 is all about, at its simplest level, was a set of army regulations concerning being declared unfit for military duty because of psychiatric reasons. The regulations went something like this: a person could be discharged from the military because of psychiatric disability. In order to be so discharged, a person had to apply for the discharge. If a person was sane enough to want to be discharged, obviously that person was not crazy enough to be sent home. Catch 22. The only way you could be discharged was by not wanting to be discharged, in which case you would not apply for a discharge, so you couldn't be discharged anyway. Simple. The author of Catch 22 used this particular inanity as a paradigm for the military, but the application can be much wider than that.

I believe that most of us create a kind of Catch 22 when we think about our faith. We all want to be more faithful, I think; we want to have a surer sense of God's presence and be enabled by that sense of presence to live more courageously, to act in more Christlike ways. And yet we convince ourselves that in order to be more faithful, we need something that we don't have and it is impossible to get. We tell ourselves that those who are faithful to the point of great sacrifices--people like the great prophets, or saintly person, we tell ourselves that those people are different than we are; they have special gifts, or special training, or somehow they are made differently enough from us that we can't be like them. To want to be like them shows that we are not like them and therefore we can't be like them because they have something that we don't. Have I lost you yet? What I'm trying to say is that I think we sell ourselves short sometimes, both ourselves and our potential for relationship with god, by attributing to those whose faith we admire, or even envy, some special edge which allows them to do what they do and reduces us to the status of spectator or perhaps cheerleader.

Now you may be wondering what all this has to do with Jeremiah, or specifically Jeremiah's call, which your Pilgrim News and your bulletin this morning have assured you that I am going to talk about. Do not

be distressed; there is some relationship. My remarks up to this point have been a sort of preface which explain why I at least--Shep may have other reasons--but they explain why I think it is a good thing that we are studying the book of Jeremiah this Lenten season. Lent is a time when we are encouraged to deepen our faith, a time for us to be deliberate and intentional about participating in our spiritual growth, and I think the greatest stumbling block we face as we think about becoming more faithful is that we don't think of faith as something we have much control over. We create this great gulf between ourselves and some brand really faithful people and then we attribute to them all sorts of qualities and gifts that we don't have. So we get discouraged, or more importantly, we define our potential for growth and faith in ways that are too small. We extinguish the spark in us which longs to be a Christian hero, and resign ourselves to the commonplace.

I do not think that it is totally our own fault that we do these things. When we read biographies and accounts of super-faithful people, usually the writer has a lot invested in showing what an extraordinary person some particular saint was, so the picture which emerges is one of truly faithful people somehow comprising an untouchable elite. And that's where Jeremiah comes in. Jeremiah was a great prophet, one of the greatest prophets ever--faithful and powerful and able to be sacrificial--and yet when one reads the book of Jeremiah, what is most immediately apparent is how human Jeremiah is, how much like us. In significant ways. Jeremiah, perhaps the greatest prophet in the history of Israel, does not "have it all together." He gets angry; he feels afraid; he whines about what God is doing to him, and he challenges God about God's apparent inequities in dealing with creation. Jeremiah gets tired; he wants to quit; he wishes he was never born; and yet he is faithful. He delivers his messages and lives with the consequences of what he has to say. He is a superstar, a superprophet, and yet sometimes he seems as fragile and as partial and as filled with doubts and insecurities as we are. And that's why we are studying Jeremiah this Lent, because even in his greatness, he is so easy to identify with, perhaps through the accessibility of his life and ministry and questions, each of us may be moved to do some more deliberate thinking about our own lives and questions of faith.

Jeremiah's religious life begins, as does the life of all prophets with an experience of Call. In the formula phrase of most Old Testament calls, we hear Jeremiah saying, "The word of the Lord came to me," and then a quotation about what God said. Now I would guess in the exercise of separating really faithful people from ourselves, the experience of call is one of the most common dividing lines. Most people do not think of themselves as receiving calls from God; in fact, most people are skeptical about other people receiving calls from God or anything else smacking of supernatural religious experience. Only prophets, saints, wierdos, and some ministers receive calls from God. Or so we are inclined to think. But perhaps the reason we think that way is that we are distorting what it means to be called. If what we mean by call is that someone hears an audible voice of God saying, "I want you, do this." then I would guess that mostly only disturbed people experience that kind of call, and the call originates not from God but from their illness. I know the Old Testament makes it sound like prophets and other holy people received direct messages from God, but I would like to suggest that in the telling of Old Testament calls, some literary freedom was exercised by the authors. It makes a better story if someone hears a voice from God; moreover, an audible voice of God with a readily

distinguishable message emphasizes the point that those called were in fact doing what God wanted them to do, telling a community something that God wanted it to hear, and that these important messages were not being pulled out of thin air.

Perhaps some prophets did really hear what sounded like an actual voice, but I would guess that for most of them at least, their sense of call was a little more complex. I would suggest that the experience of call as felt by most people has little to do with heavy voices and more to do with that person taking hold of some small corner of God's truth he or she feels that he or she understands or is certain of, and then using that insight as the integrational framework for life. It involved deliberately making whatever one understands about God or relationship with God central to how one thinks or acts in all situations. Let me try to be more concrete here. I was struck several weeks ago when in the course of one of his sermons, Shep said that the reason he became a minister was that he had a message to deliver, and that message was that we should love God for Godself, and not for any other reason. Now I have not talked to Shep about this, so I may be misinterpreting his experience, but what it seemed to me like he was saying was that the piece of God truth, the insight, that we should love God for Godself was clear and accessible to him, and he let that piece of truth become in some way definitive for him. He let it become so important that it even guided his choice of vocation.

Or--and I feel I'm on less shaky ground here--when I consider my own sense of why I became a minister, the first thing I remember feeling that I knew about God was that faith had to do with action. At the point in my life when I came to believe that I didn't believe in institutional religion, I didn't know if I was a Christian or a Jew; and I certainly had no sense that I might become a minister. But I knew that faith and action had to be connected. That was my insight about God. And in the ensuing years, I worked at making that belief more and more a part of my life. I gave it space. I interpreted what I did through it, and consequently was unhappy with work I chose to do, until I chose a career which meshed with the growing set of beliefs I carried about my faith and how I should act. I decided to be a minister so that I could not only connect my own faith and my own action, but I could tell other people to connect their faith and action as well. I was told once by a friend that I have only one sermon in me which I keep rearranging, but in fact keep repeating, and the message of that sermon is "Don't just stand there, do something!" And perhaps it is true. If it is, I'm not too apologetic. Not only do I consider that a good message, it also happens to be what I know best about my relationship with God. Even after all my theology classes, and bible study, and a lot of work in terms of filling out my system of beliefs, what is still most real to me, what still calls me to God and God to me, is that first knowledge that I had--that faith and action are connected.

Now you might say that this is all well and good, but both Shep and I are ministers, one of the brands of strange people who are supposed to receive calls. But when I think of a sense of call, I would also think of a friend of mine back in Connecticut. When he was 21, what he knew best about God was that God is present in all creation. That was his insight. Armed with that corner of God's truth, he went to seminary--but dropped out after a year. He didn't want to spend his time cooped up in churches and peoples houses; he had no

patience with the institutional church. He is now a veterinarian, and through his work, he delivers his message: that what he knows best about God is that God cares about all of God's creation. A call does not necessarily take a person into ordained ministry within the church; but it can transform whatever work a person undertakes into ministry in the name of God.

I would say that Shep and I and my friend Bob all experienced what it is to be called by God. But that does not mean that any of us heard voices or got clear directions from on high as to how exactly we should express our calling. Each of us felt we knew something about God--not all there is to know about God, but something important--and then worked at letting that insight take root in our lives and interpret our experience. We allowed ourselves to be called by taking seriously what we understood about God, even in its partness.

I believe that all of us are called by God, called like Jeremiah to the work of building and planting, and making the love and grace of God evident in the world. But the way we receive the call is not through supernatural voices. We receive God's call through our experience and our understanding which illuminates a portion of God's truth for us. We come to understand something about God and then we work with what we understand; we push its limits and add on to it and nurture it and seek to make it more central in our lives. We seek to let the insight which we have be known to others through us.

The process is not a steady one; it is by no means as reliable or comfortable as a voice coming down from heaven and telling us how God feels and what God wants from us. We have to struggle and make mistakes and figure out for ourselves what it means to make what we know about God central to our lives. But that is the only beginning of the journey of faith; that is the only way to begin to be more faith-full. We must begin with what we know, with what seems clear to us, however simple or partial that seems. We look for the voice of God calling us through whatever we already understand about God and our Relationship with God, and move from there to discover the message each of us is called to deliver to the world in God's behalf.