

Our scripture reading today is about recognizing a call. A call not only to deliver a kingdom offering grace, forgiveness and hope to a lost and dying world, but a call that requires us to step back and to take a look on our own limitations; barriers if you will, that may distract, detour or even prevent us from carrying out our call. By becoming aware of our limitations, we can well prepare ourselves to face these barriers head on without being taken back by the element of surprise. That is, before we are given an opportunity to be distracted by the world, we must learn to identify, overcome and become less dependent on what the world has to offer us and to become evermore dependent upon God.

For as far back as I can remember I have always been fond of science fiction and fantasy stories. Whether it was in the form of a book, a movie or a television show like Star Trek or the Sid and Marty Croft shows of my youth, (my favorite was the Bugaloos), I was always engrossed by the wonderfully exciting characters and worlds they portrayed. One of my other favorites I believe has a story line that relates well to the topic of being called and the importance of faith as recounted in our scripture reading today.

The Lord of the Rings collectively tells the story of Frodo Baggins, a Hobbit who battles against the Dark Lord Sauron to save his world, Middle-earth, from the grip of evil. In the trilogy of films, Frodo and his fellowship of friends and allies embark on a desperate journey to rid the earth of the source of Sauron's greatest strength, the One Ring; a ring that has the power to enslave the inhabitants of Middle-earth. The trilogy chronicles incredible adventures across the treacherous landscape of Middle-earth and reveals how the power of friendship, love and courage can hold the forces of darkness at bay.

Within the fictionally scripted words of J.R. Tolkien's Trilogy, we find that Frodo the Hobbit recognizes and carries out his "call" to destroy the evil "one" ring before its power is able

to corrupt and destroy all of Middle-earth. His call, like many of the calls of the Bible we have grown to know and love so intimately, involves a long and extremely dangerous journey, one that demands a great deal of trust and sacrifice. In one scene, Frodo expresses to his friend Gandalf the Wizard his fear and his wish that the ring had never come to him. Gandalf responds with these words, “We cannot choose the time we live in. We can only choose what we do with the time we are given.”

Just as Frodo’s journey placed him in a tough place to be, so we too, as representatives of God’s Kingdom, find ourselves discerning and carrying out our call in a world that is likewise tough to be a part of. Our trust in God must be great because we have been sent, like the disciples, into a difficult world; a world that the gospel writers have collectively described as containing three barriers. We must learn from their experiences today because we will most certainly also find ourselves encountering the very same barriers if we take seriously the commission of Jesus Christ to “. . . go into all the world.” Two of the barriers are external; things we will face in the world and the third barrier is an internal one, something we must face within ourselves.

Before we continue this morning, let’s take a moment to seek God and to ask that we become well prepared for this lesson today. Let us pray:

*Dear God of Heaven –*

*Teach us this day not only to recognize our call, but help us to also become aware of our limitations; those things that may distract us from carrying out our call, so that we may be well equipped to deal with them and to overcome them for Your Glory. Open our minds that we may learn, our hearts that we may feel, our eyes that we may see and our ears that we may hear you in this place*

*today. All the saints in heaven and on earth join in giving all glory, honor and praise to you, both now and forever.*

*Amen!*

First and foremost we recognize that there often exists a barrier of unbelief. When Jesus ministry led him to his home town of Nazareth, he encountered unbelief that far exceeded any that he and the twelve had encountered before; thus resulting in the well known phrase, “A prophet has little honor in his hometown, among his relatives, [and] on the streets he played in as a child.” (Mark 6:4). As members of the LGBTQ community who have been called into Christian service, we too find ourselves facing the unbelief of the world.

Many of us were raised in the Christian tradition and while many have found solace and comfort in its teaching, some have been hurt by it. Whether we choose to become part of an organized community of faith or simply acknowledge Christianity as a good idea gone bad, to way that we believe in Jesus Christ is expected; it *goes with the territory* so to speak. But, in an increasingly unchurched culture, acquaintance with Christ is generally nominal at best. And so we find that our own brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community have found themselves overcome by the barrier of unbelief; a road block or misdirected detour that is not easily overcome.

For many there is a failure to find comfort in the promise of God’s Word because of the world’s unbelief that the LGBTQ community can be loved, called and sent by God. And so the barrier of unbelief is one that we will most certainly encounter when we take seriously the fact that God has called each us – regardless of our gender, sexual orientation, race, age, physical challenge, health status, gender identification, nationality or economic status – to break forth with the good news of God’s Kingdom into a lost and dying world. Not the good news of

commercial Christmas, bracelets engraved with WWJD (what would Jesus do?) or the imagery of crosses which adorn our sanctuaries and modern fashion apparel, but rather the good news that, “. . . God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 NIV) The King James translation states this as *whosoever* believes, and I am very excited to share with you today that this includes you and you and you and me today. I am proud to be a “*whosoever*”, what about you? Have you accepted that you too are a “*whosoever*” or are you still blinded by the unbelief of the world?

Secondly, we must recognize that we may encounter the *barrier of resistance*. It is as though there has been a progression in the Western world with respect to the Christian faith. We have moved from a culture that was once friendly to Christianity, to a culture that expressed a feeling of neutrality, to a time that many of us find ourselves in today; a time that possesses a culture that is *unfriendly* to Christianity; particularly any Christianity that expresses itself as open and affirming.

Have you ever noticed that it is okay to refer to God in our culture today; or even to refer to Buddha or Mohammed; but often people take offence at the sound of Jesus name? Why is this? Could it be that some who have presented themselves as followers of Jesus have been particularly obnoxious or hurtful? Gandhi once said, “I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ.” I remember seeing a t-shirt once that read, “Jesus, please deliver me from your followers.” At the time I found the shirt offensive. However, today I see that as with the words of Gandhi, the some underlying legitimacy in finding offense at the name of Jesus. If we take seriously the fact that we are called of God, then we must be prepared to encounter and defend ourselves against the same sort of resistance.

Lastly, we are limited by the barrier of human form. As earthly being, we often find ourselves distracted by what the Bible calls the *fading treasures* of this world. In accepting our call from God, we must, in the words of the great German Theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, consider the *Cost of Discipleship*. We must turn away from the world's standards of success and well-being and turn toward the standards of Christ; to the *forever* treasures of heaven. As those who have been called by God, we must not dare enter into this dangerous world apart from the empowering gifts of Christ; gifts that will surely help us in overcoming the barriers of unbelief, resistance and our own temporality.

Empowerment comes to us through our realization and acceptance that at the heart of Jesus' commission to his followers was and is that *HE* called them, *HE* sent them and most of all, *HE* gave them authority over the barriers they would face. The true sense of the world authority used here is *power*. Recall that Jesus' instructs the disciples to, "Take nothing for [their] journey, [no] staff, [no] bag, [no] bread, [and no] money – not even an extra tunic." Though they went without the provisions of the world, they were empowered by the authority given to them by God, "power and authority over all demons and cure diseases." With this power, Christ "sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to heal" just as Christ *has sent* and *is sending* each of us into the world today.

In Mark's account of our scripture reading today, we are told that Jesus sent out the disciples in pairs. To learn that Jesus did not send the disciples out alone, speaks to the essential well-being of those who are called by Christ. Recall Jesus' words as told in Matthew's gospel, "For where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (18:20). And so we learn today that not only are we given power and authority through Christ, but we are also given community in Christ. International Christian Community Churches is a denomination

which exists to build and foster Christ - like community where the Kingdom of God shall break forth. Together we have had the opportunity to pray together; to talk to, to learn from and in some instances to cry with one another. More importantly, together we have sought God's Will and direction for our lives, our churches and this denomination and we have found comfort in the responses we have received.

Those who are called by and empowered by Christ will find themselves casting out demons and bringing health and wholeness where there is sickness not only of the body, but also of the heart, the mind and the soul. The demons that plague our world with oppression, hatred, bondage and prejudice will give way when confronted by Christ in the person of his disciples. Disease and brokenness will give way to healing when ministered to by those who have been called by God.

Know that God is in control and that we must rely on God's time, not our own. Also know this today; God never gives up on us. The disciples were not perfect, but they were faithful. We are not perfect, but if we are faithful to seek God's call and will for our lives; to do all that we can to honor it, then God is faithful to prepare a path for us; to keep in pruned and to guide us in the way God would have us to go.

There are many individuals here today who are beginning to find themselves in a place they may never have thought they would be; a part of the Kingdom of God Breaking Forth. I have been incredibly blessed by many of you and your faithfulness to accept God's call in your lives. I have felt your prayers, seen your tears, felt your joys, as well as your pains and I have heard your desire to do more to bring God's Kingdom to a lost and dying world.

As I close this morning, won't you pray that God will continue to make the call on your life clear and ask that God will give you the strength to recognize and to overcome your limitations wherever God's path may lead you? Let us pray:

God, Creator of heaven and earth, give us life.

God, our beginning and end, give us time.

God, give of all good gifts, give us peace.

Jesus, born of a woman, have compassion on us.

Jesus, son of David, have mercy on us.

Jesus, the way, be our truth and our life.

Jesus, the Word of God, speak in us.

Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, strengthen us.

Spirit of God's power, encourage us.

Spirit of grace and mercy, gently touch us.

Spirit of God's favor, overshadow us.

Rejoice and give praise, for great is the power of the spirit working in us.

Amen!