

Worship for September 22, 2024

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship Psalm 100
Cry out with joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness.
Come into God's presence with a song!

Prayer of the Day

Gracious God,
give us pure hearts that we may see you,
humble hearts that we may hear you,
hearts of love that we may serve you,
hearts of faith that we may live in you,
reverent hearts that we may worship you,
here and in the world beyond our doors,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Hymn 307 God of Grace and God of Glory

Prayer of Confession

Holy and merciful God, in your presence we confess our failure to be what you created us to be.
You alone know how often we have sinned
in wandering from your ways,
in wasting your gifts,
in forgetting your love.
By your loving mercy,
help us to live in your light
and abide in your ways,
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.
The old life is gone and a new life has begun.
I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ,

our sins are forgiven and we may be at peace. Amen.

First Reading Psalm 124

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Mark 9:28-50

Morning Message

This scripture text is so rich with meaning that it makes it difficult for me to decide in what direction I want to go. So, for today, let's focus on Jesus' instruction that his disciples be salt and light.

I've spent two days this past week teaching a class for the presbytery's Commissioned Pastor program. I do this regularly for the program. The course was Christian education-what do children need as they begin their faith journey; what do other age groups need? We talked about Howard Gardiner's theory of Multiple Intelligences. We are all intelligent, but we process the world differently. That is something to keep in mind as we engage children, youth, and adults in faith formation.

We also spent considerable time exploring what is meant by "call" and "vocation." I always love this conversation. The word "vocation" comes from the Latin, "vocare." It means to be called out. We are all called to love and serve God in our particular setting with whatever gifts and skills we have to offer.

Presbyterian and Reformed believers understand call and vocation in this way: We are all called and gifted by the Holy Spirit. How we live out our faith becomes our vocation, the work or role we embody that can point others to God.

We see this quite readily in those whose lives are spent in the healing professions. Teachers are also easily identified as people called to an area of education and they live out their faith in the ways they teach and interact with students and others in the school setting, helping build a firm educational foundation.

The students that I worked with this week are all in their first year of preparation to become Commissioned Pastors. They are many different ages and stages of life. Some are young adults and some are retired from careers. They may or may not feel called as yet to the ministry, but, they are all eager to learn about the life and faith and skills needed to fulfill the pastoral role.

As I was preparing this message and reflecting on the gospel text, I began focusing on Jesus' instruction to his disciples to take up the ministry mantle in a particular way: to be salt and light in the world.

In ages past, salt was sometimes used as currency. Sometimes people were paid for labor with a portion of salt. When someone does a good job, we could say he or she is "worth their salt." And vice versa.

Salt has healing properties, it can purify, it can bleach, it can flavor food, it can preserve things from being spoiled. Jesus urged his friends to retain their saltiness in order to be effective believers and leaders.

When Jesus says his friends are to be light, he is instructing them to be beacons of truth and goodness in the world and to point to the Light of the world, Jesus.

It's a pretty clear job description.

And yet, often people do not feel worthy of the calling or they don't feel prepared to serve. Sometimes when calling for a person to be a Sunday School teachers we hear, "I don't have a deep background in the Bible. I'm not qualified." Well, guess what, none of us is ever finished learning the lessons of scripture.

In my reading, I ran across the story of someone that the world would say had an exceptional gift and he was called to use it, to bring beauty into the world. But, throughout his life, he felt like a failure.

The works of Vincent Van Gogh are some of the most recognizable in the world. We can all get a mental image of "The Starry Night." His work was extraordinary.

But he had his challenges. He failed as an art dealer, failed as a teacher, failed as an evangelist. He struggled in his personal relationships. He thought of himself as a painter, but, he did not get public approval. In fact, his work was largely unappreciated during his lifetime. That's not uncommon, but it can be devastating.

In 1880, while living in Belgium, he wrote to his brother of his mental and emotional struggles: So you mustn't think that I'm rejecting this or that. In my unbelief, I am a believer, in a way, and though having changed, I am the same, and my torment is none other than this, what could I be good for, couldn't I serve and be useful in some way, how could I come to know more thoroughly, and go into this subject or that? Do you see, it continually torments me, and then you feel a prisoner in penury, excluded from participating in this work or that, and such necessary things are beyond your reach. Because of that, you are not without melancholy, and you feel emptiness where there could be friendship and high and serious affections, and you feel a terrible

discouragement gnawing at your psychic energy itself, and fate seems able to put a barrier against the instincts for affection, or a tide of revulsion that overcomes you. And you say, “How long, O Lord!” Well then, what can I say, does what goes on inside show on the outside? Someone has a great fire in his soul and nobody ever comes to warm themselves at it, and passers-by see nothing but a little smoke at the top of the chimney and then go on their way. So now what are we to do, keep this fire alive inside, have salt in ourselves, wait patiently, but with how much impatience, await the hour, I say, when whoever wants to, will come and sit down there, will stay there, for all I know?

That, my friends, is the testimony of a believer desperate to find his calling, his reason for living. He wants to share the gospel, but, his experience is that no one takes notice of the fire of his faith.

The result of all this spiritual wrestling was that while he was in Belgium he devoted his life to art.

He had recently been dismissed from his position as a preacher and was searching for what he was being called to do. In September of 1880 he wrote again to his brother: Well, and notwithstanding, it was in this extreme poverty that I felt my energy return and that I said to myself, in any event I’ll recover from it. I’ll pick up my pencil that I put down in my great discouragement and I’ll get back to drawing, and from then on, it seems to me, everything has changed for me, and now I am on my way and my pencil has become somewhat obedient and seems to be more so day by day. It was poverty, too long and too severe, that had discouraged me to the point that I could no longer do anything.

And then the artist was reborn. He could identify his calling afresh following a deep depression, from which he suffered periodically his whole life long.

Vincent Van Gogh-, child of the manse and aspiring preacher-set his life in the context of scripture, quoting Psalm 22 and later Mark’s gospel, as we read here.

His brother Theo provided financial and emotional support that made it possible for the artist to live out his call, his vocation. His sister-in-law, Johanna is credited with the preservation of his work.

But our greatest thanksgiving is that this extraordinarily gifted man had enough salt in himself to pursue the work God called him to do.

Our stories may not be quite that dramatic, but, we are all called and equipped to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in all our actions and in all our relationships. God can call us into a work and God can call us out for some other purpose.

Theologian Frederick Buechner is credited with saying, our call is where our greatest desire meets the world's greatest needs.

I pray that is so for all of us.

*Hymn 772 Live Into Hope

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

* Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

*Hymn 837 What a Fellowship, What a Joy Divine

*Blessing

Go now and take hold of the life that really is life.

Shun eagerness for fortune,

but be rich in good works.

Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.

And may God be your refuge and fortress;

may Christ Jesus free you from all that ensnares you;

and may the Holy Spirit provide you with peace and contentment. Amen.

*Postlude