

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

YOU ARE KNOWN Jeremiah 1:4-10

With the exception of when you have not done your homework for a class, or if you happen to reside in a police state, or the first time you visit a new church, who does not want to be known? Psychologists tell us that the two fundamental needs of a human being are security and significance. These two needs are what drive us to do what we do, for good or ill. All our fawning over important and powerful people is an attempt to be invited into the aura of their significance and the spot light of their notoriety. We desire to be “somebody,” a person others know and recognize as important.

You know what? You already are “somebody.” As God told the Prophet Jeremiah, while he was yet a child, he says to each of us: “*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you...*” These words of God serve both to reassure us that we have a purpose in this world and reorient us toward the true source of our security and significance, God himself. What grace we find in these words. God has always known us and included us in his eternal plan. In fact, he has formed and fashioned us according to what he knows to be best for us and the world. We are made for an essential purpose in the fulfilling of God’s plan.

In the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul echoed the experience of Jeremiah when he wrote:

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

It was God’s eternal plan for each of us that we would “*be conformed to the image of his Son.*” In his assignment to us to be conformed to the image of his Son, God also included the general character of our call and the specific means by which we it could be accomplished. In general, we are to be part of a community that announces and demonstrates God’s purpose and direction in the world through Jesus Christ. Like Adam, we are to cultivate the garden, the kingdom of God. As God brought order to the chaos in creation, we are to bring the order of the garden into the wilderness of unbelief in the world. The Son, who is both fully human and fully God is the perfect example of how our task is to be fulfilled.

But, not only does God have an overall task for us in this world, he has also provided each of us with a specific role and the specific gifts necessary to fulfill that role, through the Holy Spirit. These gifts do not make us special or better than others, but equip us to perform our necessary role in the interdependent community of believers. This is evidence that we are chosen for a purpose. Being gifted in the Church for the purpose of the Church is like being a tool in God’s toolbox. Among the tools in my toolbox, a screwdriver is no more special than a wrench. In fact, when I am faced with having to remove a nut that is tightly threaded onto a screw, I need both

the screwdriver and the wrench in order to accomplish the task. Likewise, we are special to God, but in the toolbox relative to the rest of the tools we are *specialized* rather than special.

When God calls Jeremiah he says three things about his relationship to the prophet. God declares, “*I knew,*” “*I consecrated,*” and “*I appointed.*” The call of God is always personal and according to his plan for the individual. But it is always a matter of God taking in order to give. To consecrate is to set apart something or someone for a special and holy purpose. By consecrating something, it is being taken out of general use by the consecrator. But when you are then appointed, you are given a specific purpose or task. In John’s Gospel, Jesus again is our image when he questions those who are ready to stone him for blasphemy by saying, “...*can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’?*” (John 10:36). And again in his prayer for his followers on the night before he died, Jesus said, “¹⁷*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.* ¹⁸*As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.* ¹⁹*And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth* (John 17:17-19).

As Jeremiah learns in this encounter with God, the proper question when God calls is not, “Who am I to do this?” When God calls, he already knows you and has the perfect plan for you. Therefore, our question in answer to the call should be “What are my instructions?” In a similar situation, the Prophet Isaiah gave the answer that should be on our lips. “⁸*Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’*” (Isaiah 6:8). In the face of the call of God, one must become centered on God and not oneself.

“But wait! There’s more!”

Not only does the Lord have an eternal knowledge of us, a special purpose for us, and sends us out to fulfill that role, he also enables our ministry. In the case of Jeremiah, God’s call to him was for him to be a prophet. In the biblical understanding of a prophet, his role was to be the mouth of God. While the priest represents the people to God, the prophet represents God to the people. Indeed, one can say that when a prophet speaks it is a matter of God’s words in the prophet’s mouth. The mouth is then the specialized human tool for prophecy. So when God calls Jeremiah to be a prophet, he touched his mouth. Likewise, God had the Seraph take a flaming coal from the fire on the altar and purify Isaiah’s lips (Isaiah 6:7). From their experience we can learn that whatever we need to fulfill the role that God has ordained for us, will be provided by God. As the 19th century English missionary and founder of the China Inland Mission, Hudson Taylor once said, God’s ministry, done God’s way and in God’s time will not lack for God’s provision.

As we seek to follow Jesus, we are answering the call that God has put on our lives, as individuals and a church community. Through baptism we have been consecrated for a purpose, and we have been commissioned, sent out to do what God has planned for us. And as we go out we can rest assured that whatever we need in order to accomplish his perfect will shall be available to us. You are known by God. It is high time that we get around to knowing him so we can answer his call and follow him.

Let us pray.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. (The Collect for the Third Sunday after Epiphany, BCP, p. 215)

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on January 31, 2010, the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany.