

“A Higher Calling”
Rev. Susan M. Prichard
January 24, 2010

The Apostle Paul wrote many words of wisdom to the various churches he visited along the way. These words, written to the church in Corinth help us to understand our interconnectedness.

I Corinthians 12: 12-31

After Jesus completed his time of trial and temptation in the wilderness, he returned to the town of his childhood, Nazareth. Luke picks up the story by telling us that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Listen for and hear God’s word to us in these words of scripture.

Luke 4: 14-21

We will never know for sure if Jesus chose those words to read, or if they were the appointed lesson for the day. Even back in ancient times, the Torah and the writings of the Prophets were read aloud all the way through—a section per week, similarly to the way our lectionary covers most of the Bible in a three year cycle. However it came to be, Jesus took his turn reading. The section that Jesus read out loud was Isaiah’s prophecy. After he finished the reading, Jesus handed the scroll back to the attendant, sat down, and declared that the scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing. Unlike in our tradition, where the preacher stands to expand on the text, Jesus sat down to teach as was the custom in that time and place.

In these few verses, Jesus declares to all who could hear his voice, that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s words. This was no small declaration. Jesus went back to his hometown to publicly announce the beginning of his ministry. He spoke openly of his higher calling—a calling to preach to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to restore sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

What does it mean to have a higher calling? We have become accustomed to understanding what that meant for Jesus. It meant preaching, and healing, and teaching, and liberating the oppressed and the poor. But what does it mean for us, his followers? What is the higher calling that is meant for us?

As individual Christians, we can decide for ourselves how much of Jesus’ work we can take on. But in light of Paul’s comments to the church of Corinth, this doesn’t appear to be about individual salvation, but about the salvation of the entire body of Christ—the church. How can we be about God’s business when we can’t agree about what that is?

If we spend all our time reminiscing about the past, about who we used to be and want to be again, instead of looking at whose we are and what we’re called to be right now, we’re wasting time and resources. We cannot begin to envision who and what we’ll

be in the future unless we build on a solid foundation of Christian understanding and purpose—now, let alone in the future.

Paul spent time urging the people in Corinth to look realistically at what they were doing. He tried to get them to see that their arguing about who or what was more important was hurting the church. Paul wanted them to stop micromanaging the differences and concentrate on the big picture—the whole body of the church. What was God calling them to be in their community at that time in their lives. Paul said that the body needed each part to be healthy and whole.

It never ceases to amaze me that the lectionary selections continue to be so topical. And since I don't believe in coincidence, but rather an inspiration of the Holy Spirit drawing attention to the similarities in our human experience, I am pleased and amazed that we have these two texts for the Sunday after we had a congregational meeting to call a new pastor.

Our Pilgrim ancestors believed that we could with prayer and the study of scripture, discern the will of God in community. That is the same kind of community Paul speaks of in Corinth. He tells them to think about all the different skills, opinions and spiritual gifts that it takes to make the body of Christ—the church—healthy and whole. He also says that all of the members are needed to work together for the common good. Paul says that when we discount parts of the body as insignificant, or unimportant, or of a lesser value, we do damage to the whole. For Paul, the issue is who we are and whose we are. If we are all followers of Jesus with the best of intentions for the entire community, we will thrive. But if we are continually in discord, trying to insist on our own way instead of the best way, the Spirit of the body will not thrive.

Paul continually points out here and in his other letters that the church is always in conflict with the prevailing culture. The church's definition of the bottom line has to be different than that of society. The church's mission—our mission—is to preach the gospel by the way we live our lives. We are not called to be an end unto ourselves, but to be the light that shines in the darkness of the despair of the world, that leads others to the hope that is Christ. We can't be that light if our lens is cracked, or our wires are frayed, or if we're pointing in several directions at the same time. We have to put our house in order first—spiritually and financially. We cannot live off the legacies of other—spiritually or financially. We have a legal, moral, fiduciary responsibility to build on the foundations laid by our ancestors, not to live off those foundations as if they are not our responsibility to maintain or expand. I'm talking about spiritual foundations as well as the endowment. We need to be about the Lord's work first—then we figure out how to make it happen.

Friends, Jesus calls us to a higher calling. He invites us to join him in his mission of healing, redemption and hope. But he doesn't tell us to just go off on our own and do what we feel like. He models the methodology he would have us follow.

First, he goes to weekly worship, to praise God and to be spiritually fed.

Second, he calls others to work with him. He builds a community.

Third, together they study the scriptures and pray for God's guidance, nurture and support.

Four, they go out into the world together, sharing the same message, healing the less fortunate, giving comfort to the afflicted and bringing release to those in bondage.

Five, they gather together to share meals and to adjust and update their plan, constantly remaining in tune with their primary objectives.

Six, they attract others to join them by the message they share and the way the practice what they preach.

Seven, they constantly remind themselves that it is God's work they are doing, not just for themselves, but for the good of all God's people.

If we could model our lives on these principles, we wouldn't have to keep asking ourselves questions about whether or not we should maintain our building and build up our church school. We wouldn't be worrying about making the budget or paying our staff. We would be more aware of God's plan for the life of this church and then support it.

If we could surrender our wills to God's will, this church would thrive. People would be attracted here because they would sense the presence of the living God in all we say and all we do. It's no coincidence that the best seller lists are filled with books about spiritual themes, because we as humans created in God's image have deep cravings for a sense of purpose and well being. But for so long, the organized church has been more about survival than it has been about revival.

Wouldn't it be great if we truly believed that the scriptures were being fulfilled every time we read them, and that we had a part in that fulfillment? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could shout with conviction that we are the thriving Body of Christ gathered in Canton Center? What will it take to make that happen? Are we ready to make it happen? This faith community just called a new pastor, what can you do to make sure this church thrives under his pastorate?

Thanks be to God. Amen.