

A little boy looked visibly upset when he returned home from church one Sunday. When his mother asked him what was wrong, he said, “We learned a stupid song in Sunday School today.”

“What was wrong with the song?” the little boy’s mother asked.

“It said that Jesus wants us to be his sunbeams.”

The mother was puzzled by her son’s comment and asked, “What’s stupid about that?”

“Because,” the little boy obviously disturbed answered, “I don’t want to be a sunbeam. I want to be a truck driver.”¹

The position I’m going to offer in this morning’s sermon is that what God really wants is for us to be truck drivers and sunbeams at the same time. I believe that to be a fundamental principle that should influence both the choice of career paths we choose to pursue and the way we go about doing/performing/being while we’re living our lives, setting goals for our lives and pursuing our dreams. When we choose to be followers of Jesus Christ’s we are signing on to a way of life both inside the church and beyond the walls of the church where we live the rest of our lives.

Now, we’re going to look at two of passages of scripture fairly familiar to most of us this morning. The Jeremiah text offers us some thoughts about the role God plays in our choosing what we do in life and the I Corinthians 13 text provides us some instructions for how we are to go about performing the call of God in using the gifts God provides us.

Let me start by challenging one of the worst distortions there is of the way things are meant to be in the church. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia* - it means the called out ones. It’s not just those of us who are ordained who are called, but all of us.

My interest in the book of Jeremiah was first sparked by the little book “Are You Joking, Jeremiah?” The author of the book tried with humor to capture the real story about the dialogue between God and Jeremiah – especially Jeremiah’s reluctance: “God, there must have been some mistake. I can’t do work like that. After all, I’m only in my teens sporting jeans and lounging on the rooftops. I’ve had no training in diplomacy or politics, in how to speak, or how to pray in public. You’ll soon be sorry, God, if you pick someone like me. Well, God? Well, can’t you see?”²

Elizabeth O’Connor notes in her book Cry Pain, Cry Hope: A Guide to the Dimensions of Call, “(Call) implies a summoning voice which comes from above one, and at the same time sounds deep within one’s being.”³

Call is God making us aware – call is God announcing to us, in us – call is God stoking a fire in our gut through the things that happen around us and the conversations we have with others and the conversations that take place within our own hearts and minds – what it is for which God wants us to give our lives. Call involves becoming passionate about something to the point that it will not be extinguished by excuse making about one’s lack of gifts or the assuming that the gifts we have are not the ones God wants to use. Call is God’s making us aware of how it is God wants to use our lives.

To be fair to Jeremiah, prophets did often have a tough time. Jeremiah had good reasons to be afraid – good reasons to be reluctant. The reluctant and ill-equipped one though did what God wanted him to do. Frederick Buechner described it this way in one of his books: “There was nothing in need of denunciation that Jeremiah didn’t denounce. He denounced the king and the clergy. He denounced recreational sex and extramarital

jamborees. He denounced the rich for exploiting the poor, and he denounced the poor for deserving no better. He denounced the way every new god that came sniffing around had them all (falling all over one another to follow); and right at the very gates of the temple he told them that if they thought God was impressed by all the mumbo-jumbo that went on in there, they ought to have their heads examined.

“When some of them took to indulging in a little human sacrifice on the side, (Jeremiah) appeared with a clay pot which he smashed into smithereens to show them what God planned to do to them as soon as he got around to it. He even denounced God himself for saddling him with the job of trying to reform such a pack of hyenas, degenerates, ninnies.”⁴

Jeremiah was beaten, thrown in jail, thrown into an open cistern with muck up to his armpits for saying the things he believed God wanted him to say. Tradition has it that he was stoned to death by his own people. Why did Jeremiah give in to God’s call? What happened to cause this teenager suffering from an inferiority complex to be willing to put up with public ridicule time and time again?

Again from “Are You Joking, Jeremiah?”: “Keep quiet son, don’t answer me like that. Don’t say you’re only in your teens, for you will go wherever I decide, and you will say the words which I supply. Don’t be afraid of anyone at all, for they are just as scared as you if you could see inside their hardening hearts and hardening arteries. And more than that, don’t be afraid to fail, as most people seem to be, for I am with you even when you do. Yes, I am, I am.”⁵

You see, God didn’t just call Jeremiah to the role of prophet, he promised to provide the resources to carry out the work as well.

Jeremiah became a prophet of God’s because God let Jeremiah know he had confidence in him. He became a prophet of God’s because God promised to be with him. God practices a “presence ministry,” you see. God doesn’t just call us to go out and take on the world alone. God promises to be with us in the ministries we are called to.

Jeremiah became a prophet of God’s because he came to realize that his deficiencies were no worse than those of the rest of us. Every one of us is among the walking wounded. Everyone has self doubts. The world is in need of wounded healers to walk among them that they might sense that they are O.K. just the way they are as well. God wants to use our woundedness to heal the wounds of the world.

Call is part of the formula that helps us decide what we’re going to do career-wise to be sure. Whether we become a truck driver or a person who draws plans for homes or represents people in a courtroom or teaches people in a classroom or keeps a building clean or runs a business or works in a church, at some point we have to say yes to something in ourselves that causes that line of work to appeal to us. That is one kind of call. And it involves being both that and a sunbeam at the same time. If you do not understand that you are a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ’s, when you are doing whatever work you are doing; or, if you believe Jesus Christ cannot influence the way you do your work, the way you live your life every day, the decisions you make in your work, then you probably ought to talk to someone, either to see if another set of eyes can help you see how to live your life as a Christian in the line of work you do or help you find another career.

But, there’s another aspect of call that sometimes occurs in our lives that has to do with the how we spend the rest of our time – the ministries we say yes to in the life of the church or in the community for example.

Pastor Bob Kaylor shares a story about a woman named Catherine Rohr who earned a good living as an investor on Wall Street. In May, 2004, she was invited to tour one of the prisons in Texas and her life was changed. She felt compassion for the inmates as she toured the facility. She saw some things in the prisoners that she thought just might make them successful in the business world. As slimy as the drug dealers she met in that prison were, she saw them as entrepreneurs – people who knew how to handle money. She wondered if the potential she saw might be channeled positively.

She was so intrigued by the possibility that she left her investment career in New York and moved to Texas with her husband and started a ministry to help inmates develop their skills as legitimate business people. Despite all the hurdles she had to overcome, Catherine Rohr hung in there and today more than 370 inmates have graduated from her program – 97% of whom were employed within four weeks after their release from prison. When asked how she did it, she offered that she prayed to God and said, “Bring it on.”⁶

One aspect of a passion-driven church is that people pay attention to the tugs on their heartstrings when issues of life are brought up/discussed around them. Out of such tuggings – such sparks in our guts – have sprung forth such ministries in the last few years as the shawl ministry, cancer care, model train, and Indian Springs Secret Santa ministry teams. And we’re going to hear about a couple of more in the coming months. Ministry teams like the Children Needing Love Ministry Team that will be donating stuffed animals to children through Nationwide Children’s Hospital and a possible prison ministry team.

Now, another aspect of a passion-driven church has to do with the attitude with which we carry out our ministry. This is where today’s text according to I Corinthians 13 comes in. Those of you who here last week hopefully remember hearing me say several times that no gift is more important than any of the other gifts. Well, I lied. I mean, I didn’t quite tell the whole story. The last verse of chapter 12 sets up this beautiful text we know as the love chapter. And this verse is meant to join the two emphasis of Paul’s letter – the no gift is more important and all of our gifts must work together in order for the church to be all it can be (which Rev. Rudy Heintzelman is going to deal with next Sunday); and, that there is one gift that needs to be included in order for all of the rest of the gifts to be really used effectively. And, that other gift is the gift of love. Paul wrote: “But strive for the greater gifts. And now, I will show you a more excellent way.”

And then followed, “If ... but have not love” over and over. If the gifts we have are not used because of love – if the motivation behind our gifts being used is not love – there’s really no point in using our gifts. It’s all about using what gifts we have with love - lovingly. It’s not just that love is above all the other gifts; rather, it’s that it wraps itself around them, fills them up, provides them body, depth, meaning.

The familiar words of the 13th chapter of I Corinthians are often read at weddings and they’re good words for married people. But, the fact is, that’s not why the words were written. They were actually written to inform us – the community of faith - how it is we should behave when we’re together – how we should behave when we work together – the atmosphere in which our gifts should be shared.

Passion-driven ministries aren’t about us. Passion-driven ministries – ministries based on love – motivated by love – means being patient with those to whom ministries are offered – means being kind when we are performing our ministries – means not being envious of other ministries – means not boasting about how much good our ministry is doing – means not being resentful of either those we minister to or other ministries in the life of the church.

It’s not about us – it’s about others. A church driven by passion – by love – not self-love or romantic love – but agape love - is about others – not how we are impacted by the actions of those whom we serve.

St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Indianapolis describes itself as a *Passion-Driven* congregation. In the preface to a book by that title written several years ago by the outgoing and incoming senior pastors are these words: “Knowing your purpose in ministry is vital, but you also have to have a passion for it or you’ll never achieve it. Purpose tells us where we are going, and passion gives us the energy to get there. A person with a purpose and no passion will talk eloquently about a goal, but that goal will never be achieved. Ideally, a person and a church should be clear about their purpose and have an inner passion for it that will give them the energy and power to actually achieve it.”⁷

When love is the motivation behind ministry the ministry continues even after the press quits covering it. Reaching out to others in love often means putting ourselves in a position to be ridiculed or criticized. Love often requires us to leave our comfort zones. Love doesn't necessarily mean solving the problem.

George Reed shares the story of a time he went to tuck his seven-year-old son in for the night when he discovered that his son was crying. When he asked him what was wrong, his son, Ben, told of how he and his friend, Raymond, had been playing one-on-one soccer when the ball got away from them and rolled into an area where some older boys were playing.

When Raymond went to retrieve the ball, one of the older boys kicked it into Raymond's face and laughed. Raymond ran off to a small clump of trees while holding his hands to his face. When Ben got to him Raymond's nose was bleeding and he was crying in the dark shade of the trees.

George asked his son, "What did you do?"

And Ben said, "I gave him my handkerchief and then I cried with him."⁸

Sometimes that's all we can do, but when we are called by God to live out our faith, cry with those who are in pain, we must be ready to do so. Passion-driven ministries are those given birth by someone who has heard the invitation of God to do something and they can't rid themselves of the nudging. Passion-driven ministries are those which are saturated with love.

Let us pray.

1. King Duncan, "Jerry's Story...And Ours," Collected Sermons: Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
2. "Are You Joking, Jeremiah?"
3. Elizabeth O'Connor, Cry Pain, Cry Hope: A Guide to the Dimensions of Call (Washington, D.C., The Servant Leadership School, 1987), p. 80.
4. Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures.
5. "Are You Joking, Jeremiah?"
6. Bob Kaylor, http://bobkaylor.typepad.com/bob_kaylor/2008/08/fourth-and-one-sermon-for-august-31-2008.html.
7. E. Carver McGriff and M. Kent Millard, The Passion-Driven Congregation (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 17-18.
8. Ronald H. Love & George Reed, "Where Will Your Voice Be Heard?" *The Immediate Word*, (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., January 31, 2010, issue).