

A Sermon for Epiphany 4, Year C
January 28, 2007
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“*But, I’m only ...*”

Today’s readings are good resources in any discussion, sermon, or teaching on the topic of ministry.

For example, the reading from Jeremiah assures us that God is present with us in our ministry, to provide us with direction and guidance. Just as he did with Jeremiah, God will tell us where to go, and what to say.

The reading from 1st Corinthians informs us that any talents or abilities that we may bring to our ministry, or any that God gives to us, should be used to build up the community. Any *personal* agenda, plans, or goals have to be set aside in favor of those adopted by the community.

And the reading from Luke reminds us that, sometimes, and even if we *are* following the leading of God, and are working for the betterment of the community, some in the community may not approve of what we are doing.

Therefore, and based upon my understanding of these three readings, I believe the attributes any person called to ministry – and all of us are – must have, are:

Faithfulness: that is, being able to trust that God knows what he is doing. And this is, I believe, the most important attribute.

Selflessness: that is, being able to put the needs of the community before our own.

Courage: that is, being able to do what you’ve been called by God to do even in the face of opposition.

As I said a moment ago, all three readings are good resources for a discussion of how to go about doing ministry. But the reading from Jeremiah provides us with information about the one factor that may be the greatest *hindrance* to ministry: self-deprecation.

After God had issued his call to Jeremiah, Jeremiah demurred: “Wait a minute, God. What do I know about being a prophet? I’m only a boy.” I don’t think Jeremiah was trying to avoid the work to which God was calling him. I think he honestly doubted his abilities. And Jeremiah wasn’t the first to have doubts.

When God called Abraham to be the father of a nation, he hesitated because he was an old man. When God called Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, Moses hesitated because he had a speech impediment. When God called Gideon to lead an army to rid the land of an enemy, he hesitated because his clan was the weakest in the tribe, and he was the least important

member of his own family. When God called Amos to the ministry of a prophet, he hesitated because he was only a gardener.

The three deadliest words that can pop up in response, when God is trying to raise up people for ministry, are “But, I’m only ...” And that’s why faithfulness – the ability to trust that God knows what he is doing when he calls a particular person to a particular ministry – is the most important attribute a Christian can have.

Try to imagine where the Christian Church would be today if people like Abraham, Moses, Gideon, and Amos, in the Old Testament, or Peter, Paul, James, and John, in the New Testament had opted out of the ministries they were called to because they doubted their qualifications.

For that matter, try to imagine where St. Luke’s would be today ...

If Shawn Streepy had said to God: “You’re calling me to the ordained ministry? But I’m just a lawyer.”

Or, if Steve Mann had said: “I can’t be Senior Warden. I’m just someone who works in civil service.”

Or, if Deb Callaway had said: “I can’t lead the outreach ministry. I’m just a school teacher.”

Or, if Mike Jones had said: “I can’t lead the Breakfast at St. Paul’s ministry. All I know is the insurance business.”

Or, if Christina Waggoner had said: “I can’t lead the youth group. I’m just a college student.”

Probably every effective ministry in this parish is being led by someone who hesitated at first. But what makes those ministries so effective, is because they are being led by people who are willing to trust that God knows what he’s doing when he calls certain people to certain ministries. And because they’re people who are willing to put the needs of the community before their own. And because they’re people of courage. Now, I’ve mentioned only five people by name; at St. Luke’s we have so many more.

Today we are having our annual parish meeting. We will elect new members to our vestry. We will review the year just past, and look ahead to the year to come. We have a document that contains the annual reports of eighteen different ministers and ministries. What I hope you can see in all this is that St. Luke’s is a parish absolutely brimming with people who are faithful, and selfless, and courageous. But more important, it is filled with people who, after hesitating and saying “But, I’m only ...”, found within themselves the strength to then say, “But, I will.”