

ROMANS - CALLED TO BELONG
A SERMON BASED ON ROMANS 1:1-17
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, JULY 7, 2019
10:00 a.m.

The call.

Many of us remember the call

Those two words can represent a sharp swerve on life's path.

They are words that form a bridge

that crosses from what was before

to what came after

and changed what was ahead.

They are words that with their impact,

turn us in a different direction.

We ask each other about the call with care,

with reverence,

with solemnity,

knowing that we are crossing into sacred territory,

into that space in people's lives

where major decisions happened,
where God was at work,
because a significant change came with the call.

So we ask with care.

Where were you when you got the call?

The experience can be so big, and so significant,
that everything went into slow motion,
allowing us to remember inane details,
details that burn into our memories.

Where were you when you got the call?

I was at the phone in the living room,
they told me, you need to come to the hospital.

I noticed cobwebs up in the corner by the ceiling
and dust on the end table

Why would I, how could I,
notice something as insignificant as needing to clean
at a time like that?

Where were you when you got the call?

She called me at work.

I was sitting at my desk facing out the window.

What do you mean expecting? I was dazed.

I picked up a baby name book after leaving work.

But then I got on the wrong bus coming home.

Where were you when you got the call?

He asked me at a baseball game.

There it was right up there on the jumbotron.

Will you marry me?

On occasion, people will ask me, the minister,

where were you when you got the call?

How, when, did you know you were going to be a minister?

I was sixteen.

I was in the back of our church hall.

Of all things, we had been playing pig.

To play pig you ran around the whole church building,

basement, hall, sanctuary,

the person being “it” carrying pig.

Pig was a rather decrepit stuffed toy pig from the nursery.

Pig was pink.

Pig probably could have used a wash.

We ran around the whole building,

with an abandon that would have ended youth group

if the adults had ever seen us,

and we threw pig at each other,

if you got hit with pig,

you were “it”.

If pig was missing we’d play hippo.

I was taking a break from pig when the call came.

I was sitting on a long table

which had been pushed up against a wall of cupboards.

Under my weight,

it was sagging quite heavily in the middle.

Again, the adults would not have been pleased.

My youth group leader was at my right,
leaning against the table.
There was no way we both could have sat on it.
It would have collapsed.
We were both looking ahead.
He was asking me, quite casually,
what I was thinking of doing with my future.

I told him I was seriously considering veterinary medicine.

It was perfect for me, the person frightened of people,
who was near phobic of public speaking.

I could show my compassion.

But I wouldn't have to talk.

Because animals don't talk.

It was the perfect solution.

I hadn't quite factored in the reality
that most animals going to a vet
actually have owners.

He said to me, quite casually,

‘why don’t you use your gifts to help people?’

In a way I really can’t rationally explain to you,

the room froze,

and I knew then, God was calling me to be a minister.

I spent the next nine years of my education hoping I was wrong.

Where were you when you got the call?

The call where God

reoriented your life into a significant new direction.

The call.

Paul’s story of when the call came

gets told three times in the New Testament.

Twice in Acts and once in Galatians.

Paul, where were you when you got the call?

You can hear him answering.

I was on the road to Damascus.

I was on my way to arrest and imprison Christians.

I was knocked to the ground.

There was a light, the voice of Jesus, then blindness.

I stayed at Judas' house on Straight St. in Damascus.

A Christian in Damascus,

his name was Ananias, he came to see me.

He prayed with me.

Then I could see again.

Ananias told me God said to him that

I would be the one to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

The good news of Jesus Christ,

to Gentiles.

I still had the letters in my bag from the high priest in Jerusalem,

that authorized me to arrest and imprison the Christians

as he was telling me this.

I would take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

My life took a very different direction the day the call came.

From persecuting Christians, to making them.

The call.

Paul begins his letter to the church in Rome,

introduces himself to a church that has never met him,
by describing his call.

I am Paul,

a servant of Christ Jesus,

called to be an apostle,

set apart for the gospel of God

the good news he promised beforehand,

promised in the prophets of the Scriptures,

the good news regarding his Son;

who in his humanity,

is a descendant of David

who through the spirit of holiness,

was declared with power to be the Son of God

by his resurrection from the dead.

Jesus Christ our Lord.

Called to be an apostle,

I have received grace and apostleship,

to call others,

to call people from among all the Gentiles

to obedience of faith.

Called to call people to obedience of faith.

It's a not a call people want to answer.

Paul was called, to call people to obedience of faith.

Obey has become a four letter word.

Ask a future bride sometime

if she would like the traditional Church of England's question
used in the wedding ceremony.

“Wilt thou have this Man to be thy wedded husband?

Wilt thou obey him, and serve him,
love, honour and keep him...?”

Obey is a four letter word.

The modern parent feels guilty asking their child to obey.

We want our children to be independent,
to think for themselves.

We want them to avoid mindless conformity,
and in so doing,

protect them from just going with the crowd.

To say we want them to obey,

makes us a little uncomfortable.

We want them to be good listeners.

We want them to make good choices.

We want them to respect their elders.

We are a little hesitant to have them obey.

Obedience training is for the dogs.

But there Paul is,

first thing in his letter,

declaring his mandate to call people to obedience of faith.

Seems risky to me.

People don't want to be put into an oppressive system,

a place where they are told what to do.

People don't want to get that call.

Don't want to get up.

Don't want the shake up.

Don't want to have to put up,
with some person,
or some system,
that will get their back up.

Some who hear the call to obedience of faith, don't seem very happy.

I got thinking about the older son,

in the story Jesus told about two brothers and a father.

The younger son had gone out,

blown his future inheritance on all the vices.

He came home to an open-armed welcome.

His father threw a party.

The older son was in the field.

He felt called to obedience.

He was working, being responsible, being mature,

being oldest child material.

When he came in from the field,

the party was in full swing.

He has missed the news.

He was out working in the field.

He had to ask. 'What's going on?'

The servant told him,

'Your brother is home,

they are cooking up the fatted calf,

you know, the special occasion one.

They are celebrating your brother's safe return.'

The older brother was angry.

He wouldn't go in.

He stayed outside, sore, wounded,

sure that his obedience had been unappreciated and overlooked.

So the father went out to him,

pleaded with him even,

and called him,

called him to come inside

called him to come inside and be part of the celebration.

Where were you when you got the call?

The older son was mad. Obedience had got him nowhere.

He let loose with his dad.

“Hey listen,

all these years I’ve been slaving,

I’ve never disobeyed a command,

never missed following an order.

You never even gave me a young goat,

never mind the fatted calf.

My brother the prodigal returns,

having made a mess of his life and his family a subject for gossip,

and you throw a party.”

I can imagine the older brother standing there, defiant.

The father saying,

‘We had to celebrate.

He was lost.

Now he’s found.’

The father asking, coaxing, pleading,

The father issuing a call to obedience of faith,

‘Come inside.’

‘Come be part of the celebration.’

As you know,

we aren’t told what the older son did.

Leaving that part of the story open

is meant to leave us wondering what we’d do if we were in his shoes.

what we would do,

when the call came.

Would we go inside?

Would we answer the call?

Henri Nouwen was a priest

who used to teach at Harvard and Yale Divinity schools.

Top of the heap.

God called.

And Henri moved from the Ivy Leagues to a community of people

with mental disabilities north of Toronto.

He said, ‘many of the people I live with

hear voices that tell them that they are no good,

that they are a problem,

that they are a burden,

that they are a failure.

They hear a voice that keeps saying,

'if you want to be loved,

you had better prove that you are worth loving.

You must show it.'

He says,

"The people I live with sometimes have a very hard time believing

that they are called, chosen, and invited in.

They suffer, not so much from their mental handicap,

but from the feeling of being not wanted, not desired.

They have lost touch with the truth that they are chosen, called.

It is hard for them to be in touch with that, precisely because often,

the people around them have said,

'I don't want you around.

I don't want you to be here.

Why don't you go away?'

Nouwen says,
there is another voice
the voice of the Father,
the voice that calls you to come inside.
the voice that calls to us,
the voice that says you are loved, you are the beloved,

Nouwen put the words of Scripture together for the residents in a service.

'You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter.

With you I am well-pleased.

I love you with an everlasting love.

I molded you together in the depths of the earth.

I knit you together in your mother's womb.

I've written your name in the palm of my hand.

I hold you.

You belong to me and I belong to you.

Trust that you are the beloved.

That is who you truly are.'

We desperately want to know that we are the beloved,

that we have been called inside,
that there is a celebration awaiting our return.
We find it desperately difficult to believe.
Yet we are called to obedience of faith.

Henri Nouwen shared about a worship service in their community.

“There is one of my friends there who is quite handicapped
but a wonderful, wonderful lady.
She said to me, "Henri, can you bless me?"
I remember walking up to her
and giving her a little cross on her forehead.

She said, "Henri, it doesn't work. No, that is not what I mean."
I was embarrassed and said, "I gave you a blessing."
She said, "No, I want to be blessed."
I kept thinking, "What does she mean?"

All these people were sitting there.

After the service I said, "Janet wants a blessing."

I had an alb on and a long robe with long sleeves.

Janet walked up to me and said, "I want to be blessed."

She put her head against my chest
and I spontaneously put my arms around her, held her,
and looked right into her eyes and said, "Blessed are you, Janet.

You know how much we love you.

You know how important you are.

You know what a good woman you are."

She looked at me and said,

"Yes, yes, yes, I know.

I suddenly saw all sorts of energy coming back to her.

She seemed to be relieved from the feeling of depression
because suddenly she realized again that she was blessed.

She went back to her place
and immediately other people said,
"I want that kind of blessing, too."

The people kept walking up to me
and I suddenly found myself embracing people.

I remember that after that,
one of the people in our community
who assists the handicapped,
a strong guy, a football player,
standing at the edge of the service said,
"Henri, can I have a blessing, too?"

I remember our standing there in front of each other and I said,
"John," and I put my hand on his shoulder,
"you are blessed. You are a good person.
God loves you. We love you. You are important."

You are called to obedience of faith

That is your call.

Called to come inside from the field where you are working so hard.

Called to belong to Jesus Christ.

Obedience of faith,

is simply going inside when called,

is going inside with the father to the welcome

to the celebration, to the love.

Obedience of faith

is believing, trusting and living your life out of the place,

where you know you are beloved,

Obedience of faith is

when you stop working so hard,

shaping yourself, manipulating others, proving yourself,

to show you are worth loving and have value.

It is the faith to believe you are beloved,

and the obedience to go inside when called.

That is your call.

Called to be saints.

Called to go inside, to be one of the beloved.

When we are working hard,

it takes every ounce of self-control in us,

not to become the older son,

bitter, resentful, sullen, touchy, angry,

wondering why there is no recognition for our hard work.

When we are working hard,
we can get so far afield,
the field can be so far from the house,
it can be hard to hear the celebration
of those who are inside,
basking in their welcome as the beloved.

Obedience of faith will continue beyond just going inside.

When we know we are beloved,
when we stop working so hard,
we can then let others know that they too are beloved,
go out, and call them in.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome,
in that time, the church was not St. Peter's Basilica and the Vatican.
The church was a group on the edges, some Jews who had
heard about Jesus, some Gentiles who had joined them,
a group that were on the outside.

Where were you when you got the call?

Jesus came to his own.

Came outside to us,

and called.

To those who receive him,

to those who answer with obedience of faith,

to those willing to go inside,

he gives the right to be children of God, beloved.

Paul, was called to be an apostle,

to call people to obedience of faith,

to specifically call those on the outside,

to bring Jesus to the outsiders, to the Gentiles,

to us,

to you.

You have been called to belong to Jesus Christ,

You are beloved.

You are blessed.

You are called inside.

You are called to belong.

In the obedience of faith. Come inside to Jesus.

Amen.