

Luke 4:21-30 ²¹ And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" ²³ And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." ²⁴ And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. ²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers¹ in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹ And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. ³⁰ But passing through their midst, he went away.

“Unwelcome Words”

In the three passages today we have three unwelcome words. The first is the word of the call to ministry. The second is the word to put loving one another first. The third is God not doing for us what we think he should do for us and it doesn't matter if it is exactly what he's been doing for others.

With regards to the unwelcomeness of the call to ministry we look here to Jeremiah. God had appointed him to be a prophet to the nation of Judah at about the worst possible time to be a prophet, just before and during the Babylonians coming to level the place. His message was submit to the Babylonians and make the most of captivity. For that word Jeremiah suffered gravely. Since he was a prophet of course his message would be unwelcome to God's people. After all, God sent prophets to call the people back to himself from their idolatries which meant the message would be exactly what the people did not want to hear. But, that's not what I started out to say

The LORD's call to Jeremiah to be his prophet was unwelcome to him. The LORD told him, "I've known you since before you were born. I've appointed you to be a prophet." In fear, Jeremiah objected saying he was too young to know what to say." God answered back telling him, "Don't be afraid. I will send you and you will go and you will say what I command you to say." This sounds quite domineering on the part of the LORD, but remember the LORD says it in the context of having told Jeremiah, "I know you. I know who you are. I know what will make you to be who I want you to be." More importantly the LORD says, "Do not be afraid. I will be with you to deliver you." The LORD would be with him. Then the LORD touched him and put his words in his mouth so that whatever Jeremiah said was the LORD's will and it would come about. Imagine that. Imagine if the LORD did that to you so that what you spoke was the will of the LORD and it would come about and...even worse...the word was the power to speak to the nations "to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." That would stress me out. My inclination would be to never open my mouth to speak. I guess that's why so many of the prophets recount the experience of the Word burning deep within them until they couldn't help but speak it.

Well, the last thing a preacher should do with a passage is psychologize it and especially not with biblical characters, but...I think Jeremiah as well as you and I are supposed to be hearing here that the LORD knows us better than we can know ourselves and carrying out the purpose for which he has created and appointed us will be the vehicle in which he shapes us into being the people he wants us to be. God's primary means of doing this is that he will be with us in what he calls us to. The LORD doesn't call people to be teachers in the church and in society because it is a position that needs to be filled, but because he will use that ministry, that gift, to shape them into the image of Christ and he will be in it with us. God doesn't call people to the ministry of visiting because that's something the church is supposed to do and somebody has to do it. It is that God will be with them when they visit and God will use that ministry as a means for us to get to know him and it will shape us. In our culture children grow up with adults asking them what they want to do when they grow up. Yet, they don't know themselves all that well and therefore really don't have a clue what to do. Very rarely are young people raised, even within the church, being told that God knows them better than they can ever know themselves and has ministries, good works set aside for them to do. Therefore, the most important thing for them to do is to draw close to the LORD as his disciple, walk with him, and that life shaping ministry will in due time come about and their lives will not have been in vain. The call is unwelcome to us because quite frankly we are afraid of it. Why? We are afraid that God might actually be real, afraid that we are unequipped for God's work and will fail miserably, and afraid because God's work is not the route to success that our culture says we should take. Yet the questions that bare down upon us are; what's more important: to do what we want to do or to know God? What's best for our children: to be what they want to be or to know God. That's the unwelcomeness of the call.

Next, the 1 Corinthians 13 passage indicates that the most excellent way for us to go about the call is in love. Paul says that it doesn't matter what our gifts for ministry are, nor how dedicated we are to the poor, nor the extent to which we are willing to suffer for the LORD. If loving one another is not at the heart of what we call ministry, then we're just noise makers. We are nothing and gain nothing by our efforts at loveless ministry. This is quite a humbling passage. Paul says we don't know everything. Our perspective on how we look at life, on what we think we know of God, and of how we view ourselves is like seeing in a mirror dimly. When we look in a mirror, what do we see? We see only ourselves. The mirrors in Paul's day aren't like the mirrors we have today in which we are looking at ourselves face to

face but it is only an image and can tell us nothing more than externals as we perceive them. Mirrors back then were poorly polished sheets of pot metal. The image you saw of yourself would have been quite dim and distorted. I think Paul picks this illustration to imply to us that we are by nature bent towards narcissism. If you lived in Paul's day you would have been well versed in Greek mythology and the story of Narcissus. Narcissus was a hero known for his exceptional good looks but he hated and vainly spurned those who loved him and treated them quite cruelly. The god Nemesis punished him so that he spent his days engrossed in staring in infatuation at his own reflection not realizing it was his own. When he finally realized it, he died.

When we look at life, we see it quite narcissistically. We see it from the perspective of ourselves and what we think life ought to be like. So also, when we look at God or should I say look for God, we can only see a god we've made in our own image or God the way we think God ought to be. We can not know ourselves fully. In order for us to know ourselves we need the love of God and we need the love of others for no one knows us as well as God does and others see us from perspectives other than our own. Thus, the ministries for which he has created and gifted us are crucial to us to know ourselves as we really are.

In chapter 12 and 13 of 1 Corinthians Paul goes to great extent to tell us that we each have been gifted for ministry and the nature of that ministry is not functional but relational. It is easy to just do stuff for needy people and call it ministry. It's easy to go to Evangel Hall and throw food on the table. But, if we don't sit at the table and try to get to know the people we are feeding, then we're nothing more than hash slingers. If all we do around the church is just things that need to be done or it's somebody's duty to do or we think its what are supposed churches do and yet don't strive to get to know and love each other, then we are just a noisy gong. The call to put love first is an unwelcome word because loving and being loved requires vulnerability and trust; things that don't come natural.

Finally, the third unwelcome word deals with the tension between what we think God ought to do for us and what God will actually do for us even if it is what he is doing for everybody else. Looking in Luke here, Jesus went to his home town and told them that he was the Messiah Isaiah foretold and then told them that he was not going to do the miracles for them that he had done in the other towns in Galilee. He told them that his ministry as Messiah was not for them (among whom he grew up yet they couldn't discern who he was) but for others. The nature of love is that it is self-giving. Jesus presence in our midst and the work of the Holy Spirit in us is ultimately not for ourselves, not for the benefit of us as individuals, not for the benefit of Claude church, but for the benefit of others...for the benefit of others.

Over these last seven years I have certainly asked the LORD why we haven't grown in numbers. We've grown in every way but. We've grown in knowing Christ, in faith, and most importantly in love. We've been faithful in carrying out what we discern the LORD has called us to do. We've proclaimed the gospel in word and in deed to this community and beyond and indeed the truth of the gospel is evident in the communion we have among ourselves. Why has the LORD not carried through on our expectation that this sanctuary should be a lot fuller than it is? Well, I think it would be fair to say that if everyone who was here when I first came seven years ago was still here and that if we hadn't had to say goodbye to a few that have come since because they had to relocate, we'd be easily 100 in number...that critical mass number that keeps a church like us from struggling. So apart from having to relocate, why have we lost people that were integral members of the body of Christ here? Why have people left for no other reason than they decided to stop being a part of this fellowship?

Well, I believe it is because of the unwelcomeness of the love of God. The closer God's love gets to people particularly when that love comes through a family of God in Christ, the less people, indeed each of us, are able to keep it at a distance and so we flee. When we realize that we can't keep Jesus at a distance by means of being functional in our self-determined ideas of ministry or by trying to make things around the church the way we think they ought to be around the church; indeed, when Jesus puts a halt to our terms for his ministry, our only recourse becomes either to accept that the heart of the church is to love and be loved in Christ or to flee that love; flee the necessity to give ourselves to each other in Christ. When that is the ultimatum, people will flee.

In our case, Jesus is here and where Jesus is we should not in the end expect to find a lot of people. What we should expect to find is a communion of people who give themselves to and for each other in the love of Christ and are willing to reach out in his name even if it is fruitless in the result of numbers. Moreover, we should expect to find a communion of people who have personally suffered with, for, and because of Jesus Christ. This, my friends, is who we are. Welcome to the unwelcomeness of the Word. Amen.