

“Make Yourself Big”

Jeremiah 1: 4-10, Luke 4: 21-30

4th Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2010

Lynne M. Dolan

After living with the scripture lessons for this week, I feel compelled to amend the title of my sermon a bit. I hear God inviting us to “make ourselves big,” but to be careful. Amazing things can happen when you step out in faith in response to God’s call; amazingly wonderful and amazingly dangerous. Let me first explain what I mean when I say “make yourself big.” My son Bruce plays recreational basketball. He has a really wonderful coach who is patient and affirming. Bruce is in the 6th grade and the biggest kid on his team. Coach Connelly teaches all the players, not only Bruce, to stake a claim under the basket and “make yourself big.” In other words, claim your authority and power and use it to either put yourself in a position to score offensively or respond defensively in a way that will help one’s teammates.

Making oneself big can be challenging. It is as difficult for fledgling basketball players as it is for fledgling believers. This morning we encounter two people at the beginning of their ministry. Each one responds to God’s call in different ways. First we hear the story of Jeremiah. Before Jeremiah was even born God had a plan for his life. God calls him to be a prophet to the nations. Now if you were to make a list of things you want to become when you grow up becoming a prophet would not likely be at the top of many lists. Jeremiah knows all too well the challenges a prophet faces. Like many prophets, he tries to weasel out of accepting this call. He protests he is too young, he doesn’t know what to say, and certainly there must be someone else much more qualified for this job. God insists that Jeremiah is the one. God touches Jeremiah and puts the words and intentions within him. Then God sends him out to the nations and kingdoms, “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” Surprisingly, Jeremiah does not run for the hills after hearing this. He is much braver and more faithful than I would be under those circumstances.

Then we hear of Jesus and his first big preaching engagement. He has just begun his public ministry and now he returns to his hometown of Nazareth. The folks in the synagogue are anxious to hear what Jesus has to say. In the portion of the story we hear this morning Jesus has just finished reading that familiar portion of scripture from the prophet Isaiah. When he is done, he rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and sits down. All eyes were on Jesus. However, Jesus had very little to say. His sermon is short, sweet and enigmatic. It actually consists of one profound sentence; “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That is it. What did he mean? Has he just declared he is the long awaited Messiah? Jesus steps back and waits for the congregation to respond.

At first everything seems fine. They are amazed by the gracious words that Jesus speaks. They remember he is Mary and Joseph’s son and wonder how a carpenter’s son could speak so profoundly. Jesus quickly senses they have missed the point and decides to set them straight. He has not come to be their hometown hero and anoint their complacency,

but to rock their understanding of how the world should be. He reminds them of two instances when God has been gracious to the ones they would consider the outsider. He tells the story of Elijah being sent to minister to the widow at Zarephath who was a Gentile, the one outside the bounds of the community. He reminds them of Elisha who healed the leper Naaman, the one from Syria, who was also outside the bounds of community. Jesus did not come to give the hometown crowd special privileges. He came to stir them up, to declare from the beginning that his ministry would be like no other.

There are times when we behave like the folks in the synagogue. We have our own idea of Jesus; who he is, how he should act, whom he is allowed to love, how he is to bless or curse those whom we consider either friends or foes. All too often our expectations are broken wide open. The preacher and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of a retreat she attended several years ago where the opening exercise was to tell a story about someone who had been Christ for them in their lives. After everyone had time to think, people got up and told moving stories of the way a friend had stayed put through a long illness while everyone else had deserted her, or how a neighbor had taken the place of a father who self-destructed. One after the other, she says, they shared stories of comfort, compassion, and rescue. The conference room turned into a church and she remembers the feeling that Jesus was there with them, and all was right with the world, until this one woman stood up and said, “Well, the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was, ‘who in my life had told me the truth so clearly that I wanted to kill him for it?’” That observation changed everything, however she was on to something vitally important that most of us would be glad to forget: namely, Taylor says, that the Christ is not only the one who comforts and rescues us. The Christ is also the one who challenges and upsets us; tell us the truth so clearly that we will do appalling things to make him shut up. (From Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Company of Strangers,” *Home by Another Way*, p. 43.)

The folks in Nazareth were not ready to be confronted by the truth that Jesus proclaimed that day. Who was he to proclaim that he was the chosen One of God? We may not try to drive Jesus to the edge of a cliff when we get angry, but we may wish to lash out at him, to wound him or shut him. Think of the times when you have respond in such a way. When the truth hits too close to home we lash out at the messenger. Jesus does not back down. God is on his side and God leads him through the anger and danger to safety. This protection is not reserved for Jesus. Whenever we make ourselves “big”, whenever we speak a truth that angers the masses, God is also with us. God promises to be with you, to give you the words you need to speak, to guide you safely through the mayhem, to fulfill the ministry that God has called you to undertake.

It is astounding what happens when you challenge people. The folks in the synagogue go from adulation to condemnation in the matter of minutes. Barbara Brown Taylor says it is the whole prickly matter of community that Jesus threatens in his first sermon in Nazareth, and it almost gets him killed. They want Jesus to do the things he has done for the people of Capernaum. After all, he is one of them and they deserve this treatment more than any outsider does. They however, have no special claim on Jesus. Only God

has a claim on him and when he follows the way of the prophet, as God intends, he is likely to make many more enemies than friends.

Jesus reminds them that God's sense of community was bigger than theirs was. For Jesus, this was only the beginning. Depending on your perspective, it was going to get a lot better or a lot worse. To those with privilege and power in society, Jesus rocks the boat, challenges the status quo, and advocates for the lost, the least and the forgotten ones. He would unapologetically behave in a way that was offensive to many yet faithful to God. A prophet is not always welcome in his hometown. If they were, you might wonder if he or she were truly doing their job.

It is not easy to be a truth teller, the one who constantly shakes up the hornet's nest or holds the mirror up inviting folks to take a good, hard, long look at oneself. Barbara Brown Taylor says "no matter how hard we try, we cannot seem to get God to respect our boundaries. God keeps plowing right through them, inviting us to follow or get out of the way. The problem is not that we are loved any less. The problem is that people we cannot stand are loved just as much as we are, by a God with an upsetting sense of community." This is a truth that will either haunt or empower your ministry. God's love is not reserved for the righteous. God's love, grace and mercy know no bounds. That simple truth changes everything.

We proclaim that God's love and mercy know no bounds, when we hear Pat Robertson declare that the people of Haiti deserved what happened because they had long ago made a pact with the devil. We proclaimed this truth when some folks decided that hurricane Katrina was God's response to the lascivious behavior by the folks in New Orleans. When ignorant people declare that AIDS is God's punishment for homosexuality we proclaim that even they are included in God's boundless love and mercy. The beloved community means there are no longer insiders or outsiders. The beloved community is possible when we dismantle the economic and political systems that keep some people in abject poverty and others obscenely rich. Jesus came to break down all barriers that separate us and to initiate a new community of love. Love is the only criteria for participation in this community. Too much love and too much acceptance and too few boundaries made the people want to hurl Jesus off the cliff.

We take a risk whenever we dare to make ourselves big for the sake of the kindom of God. When we stick our neck out and trust in the truth that underlies our actions, it can be scary or it can initiate a profound sense of peace. Even if we are run to the edge of the cliff, God will rescue us. God will lead us on the path and defend us against our enemies. We encounter the Holy One, in those moments of conflict, confusion and disbelief. Whenever we are met by someone who is willing to hold us accountable to the truth, all hell is likely to break lose. Don't worry though; God promises we are worth the trouble. Take courage and go forth to make yourself big! Amen

Source:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Company of Strangers," in *Home By Another Way*, Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 1999.