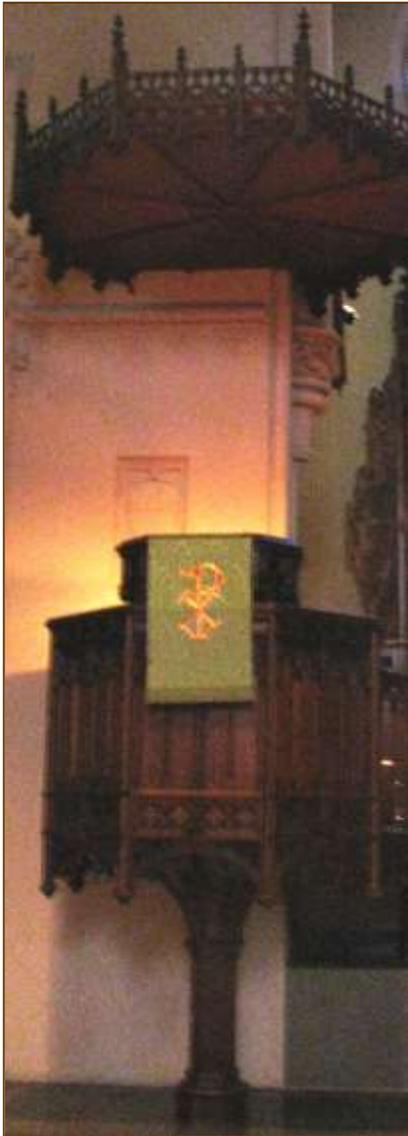


June 29, 2014
Retirement Sunday

Sermons

from a church with a conscience



“Least Among the Least!”
by
The Reverend Dr. Robert J. Campbell

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

What would it mean at this critical moment in human affairs did we in the churches show growing graces and services! A church with a conscience out in front of its age and outdistancing its own best past, in a sense of responsibility for an entire world, in its stand for economic justice, in its demand for, and illustration of, mutual honor and fellowship among races – a church with members whose convictions and characters were ahead of their contemporaries, so that it pulled them forward and lifted them Godward! Then both we on the inside and those on the outside would be in no doubt that Christ is alive and in the midst of His churches and is using them to guide and inspire the world.

Henry Sloane Coffin,
Preaching at the Church of the Covenant,
June 11, 1944

"Least Among the Least!"

Luke 10:1-20 (selected)

Ephesians 3:1-10

Text Philippians 3:13-14

"I do not consider that I have made it on my own. But one thing I do know: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Our friend, biblical scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann once told me of his early beginnings in the German evangelical tradition. It was custom for the pastor (who got to know kids very well through two years of instruction) to assign a "confirmation verse" to each youngster, one that often became the text used at their funeral. Walter's dad gave him Psalm 119, verse 105, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet." "In retrospect" he said, "I have thought it was providential because 'thy word' is surely scripture so I was 'destined' to spend my life doing what I do. My dad would not have thought that, but it makes sense to me."

I ponder that often since in similar vein David Buttrick chose today's Ephesians passage to preach on at my ordination. I have used it on several important occasions because it has always spoken to me about our relationship in being called by God. I used the text when I preached here as a candidate and I passed it on to my dear friend Sue Francis at her ordination a year ago: "I am least among the least of the people of God."

Preaching to me is always like a lyrist with a tune, which is scripture, and it is the preacher's job to add new words to old music for new times, like the hymns we sing this day. However, this call thing is not just about preaching and Sunday mornings. A minister's job is a tough job; it might just be the toughest there is. Here you are an ordinary person called by God to live and speak God's word. But all you've got is a squeaky human voice and a mind full of human limitations. It's like the little Scottish church with a Bible facing the people in the center of the chancel with the caption, "Hear The Word Of The Lord." On the reverse side, for the minister to read, the words read: "Remember, You're Not The Lord!"

How can any minister forget? That's what got to Paul. He'd been called all the while feeling his own sense of inadequacy. "I'm least among the least," he cried, with no false modesty. He was dead serious. He never got over the fact that he hadn't been with Jesus in Galilee, that he hadn't stood long and lonely at the cross, that he had persecuted the church and even held the coats for those who stoned poor Stephen to death. He was a fundamentalist through and through, a card-caring tea-partyer! But God had called Paul, kicking and scratching, into the ministry. The same is true for any honest minister; it's only by God's amazing grace that we find ourselves doing what we do. We don't have to have done anything evil. All we have to do is be human with a temper that sometimes gets away from us, or have that stubborn side that lets our ego block the road of admitting when we're wrong.

As Paul Bunyan put it over three hundred years ago: "I've been as one sent to them from the dead in chains to preach. I have gone full of guilt and terror even to the pulpit door, and only there have I been at liberty in my mind until I have done my work, and then even before I could get down the pulpit stairs, I have been as bad as I was before." All you have to do is admit that you're human. As the second Helvetic confession puts it, "We hear the word of God from sinful ministers." Because that's all there are! A clerical collar or a pretty robe with doctor stripes doesn't change it. We are sinful but the Lord's grace is forever sure and it is God who has picked us out to speak "the unsearchable riches of Christ Jesus," which is forever amazing to Bert Campbell and Amy Starr Redwine and every minister who has ever tried to honestly live into God's truth.

The trouble is, it wasn't the speaking that got to Paul nor should it get to any of us; lots of folk speak in public. It is the power of the message in people's lives that can mean so much to so many. To the college student with a new found freedom on the one hand and that sense of being all alone at the same time, who discovers that there are actually people in the heart of the campus who care. There's the power! For the cancer patient longing for some sign that she will see the sun come up another day and she then witnesses the rising of this church's window as she walks the hospital's garden of healing. There's the power! For that young lawyer who's so ashamed of his family's indulgence or that morally honest boss who got lured into a scheme for what

he thought were all the right reasons. Or the family that is struggling just to hold things together until only God knows when it will get better. The message that God is here and cares means so much!

But the power of God's love in people's lives is unknown to so many who live in prison cells of their own making, with the doors of grace wide open but they just haven't discovered it because they haven't heard it. They haven't heard that they are free to love the Lord and themselves. Like the husband and wife who came back after worship last Sunday asking, "Did you really say homosexuality isn't a sin? We believe that, but we've never heard a minister say it so bluntly!" I told them that growing up my sons always had a picture of a scrappy little boy hanging on their wall with the caption, "God made me and God don't make junk!" In all their years of church attendance that couple had never heard that God loves every single person because every single person is created in the image of God. People don't know they are free because they haven't heard that God's amazing grace has set us all free just to be. And we've been summoned to speak, to live out those "unsearchable riches of Christ"! That is what frightened Paul just like it frightens every minister worth his or her salt.

The thing is an emancipation proclamation without a job to do can lead to a wandering aimlessness that can only end up in panic. That's why there is that hard line to the good news. It's there because we have been set free to serve the Lord and that means a commitment to build a world where justice truly does roll down like a might river lifting the least and wiping away the arrogance of all those who can't seem to walk humbly with God or anyone else. It means a community of faith truly living into the motto "a church with a conscience out in front of her peers." "We've been invited to show how to put God's plan into effect!" That means "we preach so that the church can bear witness!" To hear the word means to live the word; if you don't live it you haven't heard it! The command is to go into the world and that means people need to hear the good news so that they can live that good news wherever they find themselves, from the class room to the corner office, to the kitchen table with the coffee rings stained in. You hear the word of God so that you can live the word of God. That's why you have been called. We Presbyterians openly confess it, "the priesthood of all believers." If you're a

believer then you don't have any choice but to live what you believe. That translates into doing something with that strange little phrase Paul tacks on; "The church shall declare the wisdom of God to principalities and powers."

That doesn't mean wearing a "Jesus loves me" tee shirt or having a bumper sticker that says "I found it." It means getting your hands dirty in politics and paying your taxes for better communities and making sure bulldozers are in the right places for the right reasons, something this congregation knows a lot about. It means giving up your Saturdays to tutor children and then lobbying legislatures to educate all of them, especially those who seemingly haven't a chance in hell of making it out of the ghetto! Those "principalities and powers" are the things that grip our minds and lobby our egos with sound bites that might sound right for an American agenda but are dead wrong when it comes to God's plans. So what is your message to the community outside your doors? Simply this - that no one has to ever sell out to anything or anyone! That in the eyes of our creator, no matter the avenue of faith you follow, every single person is free and invited to serve the Lord. A minister's job is a tough job and I mean yours because it's never been the Bert Campbell's of this world or any other preacher who has been called any more than every one of you. You are the ones who have been summoned, conscripted, drafted, and picked out by the Lord to live out God's incredible, unconditional, accepting, love.

As for me at this point in my journey, I'm mindful of the slogan my surrogate father lived by: "So on I go, not knowing, I would not if I might; I'd rather walk in the dark with God, than go it alone in light." (1) Throughout my ministry I have believed as did St Paul; "I do not consider that I have ever made anything on my own. But one thing I do know: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I will press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." And I pray you will always have faith enough to do the same!

1. Mary G. Brainard, in *The Congregationalist*, 1869



11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org

Convinced of God's grace, the Church of the Covenant strives to be a caring and compassionate congregation, welcoming all people regardless of age, race, national origin, marital status, gender, affectional orientation, and mental or physical ability.