

Claiming the Call
Jeremiah 31: 31-34
Philippians 1: 1-11
May 4, 2014, 11:15 AM
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I. Introduction

It's been a very special weekend, a great gift to be able to be part of Kate Murphey's wedding, and a great gift to be able to have my last Sunday before my Sabbatical be a Confirmation Sunday. We got to bless and celebrate the wonderful young people that are growing up in our church as they move from the place of baptism, where they have a call placed on them by God, to the place of Confirmation where they respond to that call and claim it for their own. And it was obviously a great gift to me to also be a part of that when my daughter is one of the class that is claiming that. That's a very sacred moment. And I'm going to share with you that sermon that I shared with the kids at the 9:00 service because part of this summer for me, and part of the summer I hope for you, is an ongoing process of claiming our call in new and different ways.

A number of years ago I took my black belt test in *aikido* and it was a very significant day for me because there had been six or seven years of pretty intense and regular practice that sort of got me to that place and it had a very momentous feel to it. And after I passed the test and my teacher was going to talk to us, I was waiting for him to share some words about how momentous this event was and some reflection on all the hard work that got us to that place and he hands us our belts and he says, "Now, you're ready to learn."

II. Claiming Your Call

Well, that's not what I wanted to hear. I wanted to hear about how much I'd already learned and how much I had accomplished in that. I didn't want to hear I'm ready to learn now. And yet, I have found over the years that have passed since then that that was exactly the case. That what I had done was get enough knowledge to really figure out how to start learning that discipline.

And what I told the Confirmands today was that's where they are, also. That they had been raised in this tradition, they had been nurtured by this church family and they have been through this more intensive piece of their church education as they have been indoctrinated into some of the very fundamental beliefs of our church. But it's not the end of the process. It's a step, an important step, the step we recognize and celebrate but a step on their ongoing journey of understanding who God is for each of them and where God is calling them in that relationship.

And friends, that journey never ends. It is an ongoing process for all of us as we claim everyday anew the faith that we are part of because if what we say is true, if the things that we say we believe are true, there is no task that is more important than claiming this faith that we have participated in, sometimes for years, and for owning personally the call that God has placed on each of our lives together.

Some of our students are going to graduate this year. What do we call graduations? It's a commencement. What does commencement mean? It's a beginning. It's the end of one phase of your process and it's the beginning of a whole new chapter. And confirmations, commencements are their marking places that remind us of this ongoing journey of deepening our faith.

For me, this summer is going to be a chance to step back from some of the

daily-ness of the ministry that we engage in together, and that has some wonderful blessings to it. It's also going to be an opportunity for me to engage a couple of disciplines that have been very important in my spiritual journey as a way of continuing the process of inviting God's transforming spirit into my life.

And we have crafted a lot of opportunities for you, as a congregation, to also be engaged in that work this summer. So that, as I work a little bit with my music, you're going to have a month with Chris Holmes to dig into how spirituality shapes our art and how art shapes our spiritual understanding. As I am practicing some of the breathing and centering that's part of *aikido*, you're all going to have a chance to spend some time with Sharon Salzberg and Jack Kornfield and others on working with contemplative prayer and deepening your ability to hear where God is calling you. And I want to invite you to claim those opportunities, to take advantage of the ongoing call that we have to make our faith our own and to continue the process in some different ways of deepening your own spiritual walk.

III. Muscle Memory

Much of the most valuable learning that I have ever had in my life was not about learning new things. It was about developing muscle memory for things that I thought I knew. And any of you who are musicians or athletes understand this process that we've got to move the stuff that we intellectually understand into the memory of our muscles physically because that's the place that we react out of. So, if you're a pianist you practice those chords, those scales over and over and over again. You're not learning new material, right? You know how to do the scales. You're teaching your body to internalize those, so that you don't have to think about it. Much of a life of faith

is about muscle memory. It's about taking stuff you know and internalizing it so that it becomes more and more a part of you.

Janet shared with us during a Children's Sermon the American Sign Language symbol for "to believe" and it was head to heart. It's moving stuff that you know into a place where it is a part of who you are. That's what it means to believe. It's a very powerful image and one that is part of our journey together in faith.

You all have probably figured out that you don't get new information from me every week, right? This is not like a college lecture. When you go into a lecture your professor is going to teach you something you didn't know before you walked in, hopefully. And I, hopefully, teach you something that you didn't know but that's really not the point. Frankly, the teaching that happens is in part to keep you all engaged because you all have heard everything that I have to say. No, I'm serious. You have heard everything I have to say because our faith is not brain surgery. The trick is how you move it out of your head and into your heart. And that's a harder process than we think. We'd like to think because we're all very smart people, so if you give me a concept I know it. What you understand when you're a musician or an athlete is that knowing it doesn't matter. When you're in the middle of a concert, when you're in the middle of a football game, you've got to react without thinking. And that's what the process of muscle memory is about.

It's about internalizing the things that we know so that we just act out of them because when we really need them we might not have time to think about it. So that, when you're in a time of crisis, that's not when you want to learn how to pray, you want to know how to pray. And that's why we gather here every single week, we're

developing muscle memory. We're internalizing the things that we know so that they become part of who we are, so that when we need that, when we're in a middle of a crisis, when we're responding to someone who is in a crisis, when we're in a place that we're healing some piece of brokenness; we know how to respond because it's become a part of who we are. So that the process of learning, of deepening our faith, is not just getting new information, it's taking what we have and internalizing it. That's why we're here every week. And I want you to continue that process while I'm gone. This doesn't end because I'm on sabbatical. This isn't vacation, it's a time to claim what you believe and to own it and to continue the process of internalizing it.

The Jeremiah passage that we heard this morning is a very beautiful passage about internalizing the law of God. You heard Jeremiah tell the Israelites, who are in captivity in Babylon, "I wrote the law out for you before on tablets of stone. Now, it's a process of writing them on your heart." So, you're not just reading them somewhere, remembering them, you have made them part of who you are. Because when you're in crisis, when you're in exile, when you don't know how your faith needs to get expressed, when you're wandering in a strange land and have new and diverse religious ideas being thrust upon you, you've got to know who you are.

Our faith journey is a process of having and letting God write on our hearts the laws that we know. So that it's not just head-knowledge, it becomes part of our DNA.

IV. Finding God's Plan

All of this is based on a call that God has laid on each of our hearts. What I told the Confirmands and what I'm telling you is that God is moving in each of your lives right now, at this very moment and calling you to a deeper, wholer, more powerful and

more centered place. Every single one of you has a call from God. And we talk a lot in our community here about our call as a community and that's a really important piece of this. But each of you has a call. God is moving in each of your lives and inviting you to claim that.

And so, like the Confirmands, I want to encourage you to claim that for yourself. This is your journey. This a journey into and with the One who created you and who loves you more passionately than you can even comprehend. This is one of the reasons that we use parental images for God because our children -- I know this struck me very forcefully today at the Confirmation service -- our children will never understand how much we love them. They can't understand it until the point that they have their own children and then they'll start to experience that.

V. Conclusion

God loves you in ways that you can't even get your head around and is calling each of you to claim that for yourself and to journey deeper into that relationship. And I will leave you with these wonderful words that St. Paul left with the Philippians, and over this summer, this is my prayer, "That your love may flow more and more with knowledge and insight as God helps you determine what is best in your life."

Amen.