

Sermon 1-31-10

Calling and Grace of God

Jeremiah 1:4-10

I would like to start my message with sharing a story of James T. Laney. James T. Laney was a professor at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. It was his habit to commute from home to school each day on his bicycle. Riding his bicycle on the way home or school, he used to greet people in the neighborhood, waving to his neighbors as he rode by. There was an old man who Laney encountered very often on his way home. The old man was always working, tending, and trimming the branches or mowing the lawn of his small garden when Laney rode by. Laney thought this old man must spend his days in retirement, quietly and in a lonely way.

One day, when Laney hadn't seen the old man out in his lawn for several days, he stopped by the old man's house on the way home to see if anything wrong had happened to him. He rang the bell and waited for a response from the inside. Then the old man opened the door and said hello and asked Laney if he could help him. Then, Laney said, "I'm pleased to see you again. I didn't see you for several days, so I just stopped by to see if you are O.K."

The old man welcomed him into his home and the visitor introduced himself. "I am a professor at Candler School of Theology, here at Emory University," handing the old man his card. If you need anything, in case of emergency, don't hesitate to call. I would be happy to be of any help to you." The old man looked up at the visitor a few times, and then said, "Please wait for me a moment." Then, the old man left and entered his own room. After several minutes, the old man came out with an envelope and handed it to his visitor.

The visitor opened the envelope and found a check, paid to the order of James Laney. The check was written for one hundred million dollars. Laney was so surprised, and asked the old man, "Why are you giving me this large check? I don't need any money. And, I don't have any reason to receive this money." Then, the old man replied, "I'm not giving you this money, but I'm pleased to find a person like you, the right person who I feel is trustworthy to spend this money in the right manner." The old man was the owner of the Coca Cola Company.

Laney brought this check to the Emory University's endowment fund and told his story. The next year, the Board of Trustees of Emory University decided to elect James Laney as the new president of Emory University. And, so, he became the president of Emory University. A few years later, James Laney was called by President Clinton to be the US Ambassador to Korea in 1993. James Laney is a United Methodist Minister who had been a missionary in Korea. Laney cared for an old man in the spirit of Jesus, but God

blessing Laney through the old man he was caring for, and in this way, God called Laney to do something more. I would call this an incident of God's grace, "Grace upon Grace." We are the people of grace of God. Certainly, there is God's grace in Christian life. We are in the debt of God's saving grace through Jesus Christ our Lord. The grace of God is freely given to the people of God. And, we are also people seeking God's grace.

There are two modes of religious life: one which asks for God's favor, and that one's will would be endorsed by God and the other which seeks for God's will by abandoning his own favor or will, and believes only in God. The former seeks cheap grace while the later gets grace upon grace from God. The will of God and His Kingdom is the most and foremost concern among the prophets in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah is one of the major prophets in the Old Testament. He lived for about fifty five years, mostly in Jerusalem, between in 642-587 B.C. He was a survivor during the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and lived out his final years of in Egypt where he was taken by refugees who sought exile there. His life and ministry on behalf of Yahweh, God of Israel, is the subject of the Old Testament book bearing his name.

God was looking for a person who would be called and sent to take God's message to the people of God. Today's scripture lesson, Jeremiah 1:4-10, shows us the scene of Jeremiah's being called by God. Jeremiah's call was to be a prophet to the nations. His life's work was to pluck up and to break down, to build and to plant. Israel no longer kept the original faith they had in their God. In this context, Jeremiah was called to send God's word to the people of Israel.

Let's recall the scenery on the day Jeremiah was called. It was a dramatic moment. We can see the decisiveness of God in contrast with the hesitation of Jeremiah.

I formed you... I knew you... I sanctified you... I ordained you a prophet unto the nations. Jeremiah is face-to face with divine demands upon his life. And in this dramatic moment, in surprise and consternation, Jeremiah cries, "Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child." But the Lord said, "Don't say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you and say whatever I command you." Then, The Lord reached out his hand and touched his mouth and said to Jeremiah, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth." Jeremiah's calling was unique and dramatic. But, here is God's message to us today.

First, God was there when you were formed in the womb and knew you.

Birthday cards are a celebration of one's birth. Sun received a lot of birthday cards and phone calls from her daughters, her sister, friends, and members of Faith church last week. She was so pleased by the cards. Sun asked me, "Is adding a year to my age worth being celebrated?" I said, "Being alive and remembering your birth itself are blessings and worth celebrating." Your life is worth celebrating. Don't feel sorry about getting old. You have not finished your chapter of life. In addition, you will have new chapter of life, eternal life after finishing chapter one of your life.

You are not an accident. Your birth was no mistake or mishap, and your life is no fluke of nature. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. He was not at all surprised by your birth. Long before you were conceived by your parents, you were conceived in the mind of God. God counted on you in His plan when you were formed. You are one of God's master-pieces. God includes you in His master plan of the world. You are His. God is not yours, but you are His. He owns you, your life, and your eternity. Your life or death is under God's plan, mercy and grace. You were already related to God even before your birth. God already started His plan before you were born. And He will fulfill his purpose in you. "The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me." (Psalm 138:8)

Because God made you for a reason, He also decided when you would be born and how long you would live. He planned the days of your life in advance, choosing the exact time of your birth and death. The Bible says, "You saw me before I was born and scheduled each day of my life before I began to breathe. Every day was recorded in your book!" (Psalm 139:16) You don't worry about your life but seek what God's plan would be.

Second, you are called by God to do something.

Everything that is made has its purpose, even those things that are only made by human means. However, you were made for a mission. God is at work in the world, and He wants you to join Him. This assignment is the calling of God in your life. You were put on earth to make a contribution. You weren't created just to consume resources – to eat, breathe, and take up space. God designed you to make a difference with your life.

Being called as a prophet, God's messenger, to the people of Israel was a privilege to Jeremiah. But, it also was very dangerous, as well as an unpleasant job. Its task was agony for the prophet.

Jeremiah was a preacher of tears. Preaching which brings laughter, compared to tears, is popular in our day. Jeremiah was to deliver a message of judgment to a wicked and sinful nation. Tears may describe the career of the prophet, for Jeremiah was hurled into the vortex of one of the most catastrophic periods in the history of the ancient world. But, perhaps every age is a catastrophic age, and every true spokesman of God is hurled into the midst of political, moral, and spiritual tensions, in somewhat the same way Jeremiah was.

A smiling face generally makes a good impression on others. One of my clergy colleagues has a naturally smiling face. But, sometimes he has been misunderstood by people because of his smiles. When he conducts a funeral service, he doesn't change his smiling expression, which makes him sometimes misunderstood by the family of the deceased. He looks happy from the pulpit when he is not supposed to be happy on the occasion of someone's death.

This may be an example of an exchange lost in cultural translation, but sometimes I don't understand when I am asked the question, "Are you enjoying your ministry?" I never have thought that ministry is supposed to be for fun. I do not think is a "fun" job indeed. I

have never thought about the ministry as a job to be “enjoyed.” I think it is a job of tears and of fear, rather than of laughter and enjoying. I can not laugh when I am supposed to pray for the sick, but rather feel a tearing in my heart. Without tearing in my heart, I can not pray for them. But, I have never complained about the job of the ministry either. I see this as God’s grace, grace upon grace.

Thirdly, you are sent by God to the world.

You were made for a mission. God is at work in the world, and He wants you to join Him. This assignment is called your mission. Mission means “being sent.” Birth itself contains the mission of God. Being a Christian includes bring sent into the world as a representative of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:21)

We are all Christian, children of God, being called and sent to the world to share the good news. Bishop Janice Riggle Huie is the Bishop of Texas Annual Conference. She once was elected as the president of United Methodist Council of Bishop. Bishop Janice Riggle Huie tells about an experience she had a few years ago that touched her heart. She was interviewing a group of ministerial students about their call to the ministry. She said to each of them in turn, “Tell me about your calling. What do you think God is calling you to do?”

Most of the students gave very practical answers, like, “God is calling me to be a hospital chaplain,” or “God is calling me to be a teacher on the college level,” or “God is calling me to be a counselor,” or “God is calling me to be a pastor.”

But then she came to one young woman who seemed a bit shy at first, not quite as bold as the others, and Bishop Huie said to her, “Tell me about your calling. What do you think God is calling you to do?” And the young woman said, “I don’t know exactly yet where God will lead me. I just know one thing: God is calling me to introduce people to Jesus Christ!”

When Bishop Huie tells this story, she says, “At that moment, when I heard that young woman say that, I wanted to take off my shoes, because I knew I stood on holy ground.”

To introduce people to Jesus Christ is the calling undertaken to us. The ultimate purpose of the calling of God is to introduce the people to Jesus Christ. This is the difference between the calling of God and a worldly calling. Being called by God is a breathtaking moment. Yet, it is a challenging, and often an unpleasant task to accept. But, it is the moment of taking God’s grace, grace upon grace. It is the moment of denying one’s life and for the sake of God.