

The Immediacy of the Call

January 27, In the Year of Our LORD, 2008

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18 and Matthew 4:12-23

This past Friday evening, I was reminded of how quickly Sally can use the remote control that communicates with our television set. While men are often accused of abusing remote controls to "channel surf," sometimes driving other family members crazy, Sally's quick hands and fingers are used for a much more practical reason: to silence commercials that are often not only obnoxious in their content, but, most unsettling, much louder in volume than whatever program the advertisements are interrupting.

So it was, with Sally out of town on her annual visit to cousins in Florida, that I found myself confronted with a particularly loud commercial break during a segment of "Law and Order" and I was not close enough to the remote to immediately silence the nuisance. The immediacy, no urgency, with which we are told that *now* is the time to buy new furniture, that new car, an in-ground swimming pool or whatever - the message is that apparently volume and vigor sells. On the one hand, I am confused by the contention that *this* is the best month to buy something when I distinctly recall being told the same thing last month. Whatever! I guess advertisers continue to up the ante of their sales' pitches because loud, vigorous, animated, immediacy and urgency is what they think sells. However, I confess I am bewildered as to how commercials that show vehicles driving on closed courses in conditions none of us will ever face sells cars. When will I be driving a truck with tons of material in tow and the truck's brakes are good enough to stop me just short of falling into the Grand Canyon? When am I going to be driving an SUV that is shown landing on the moon?

Immediacy; urgency; louder; more bells and whistles - around and around we go being told of all the things we need - and how we need them now. No, this is not a sermon about materialism - although I suppose it could easily move in that direction. Instead, this is a message about what is truly immediate and urgent and how important and vital messages can be received in calm, quiet, direct ways that move us to action and move us in the ways of God. In our reading from Matthew, in the calling of Peter and Andrew and then James and John - two sets of brothers who were fishermen - Jesus calls these four men away from their boats - and they simply leave everything and follow Him. While we can't help but wonder what James and John's father Zebedee's response is when his two sons up and leave him literally holding the nets and in the boat - there is no volume or great animation to this scene. Indeed, the situation is marked by an incredible calm.

However, that this episode is marked by calm voices and little excitement does not mask the fact that there was still some urgency and immediacy to what transpired. The penultimate verse of our reading from Matthew says:

Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

There *was* an immediacy to this. Jesus knew His public ministry was not going to last long. He believed He had only months if not just a few years to preach, teach, heal, convince, cajole - accomplish all that Jesus had to do before well, before what Jesus knew would happen once he got to Jerusalem. Listen again to how our reading from Matthew 4 commenced:

Now when He heard that John had been arrested, He withdrew into Galilee, and leaving Nazareth, He went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulan and Naphtali.

The Gospel writer reminds us that Isaiah predicted this - that the northern parts of ancient Israel would see the Light of the World, the Christ, but the real significance is that Jesus knew that were He to remain in Judea, that His ministry might end before began. His cousin John the Baptizer's arrest and the realization that John would never be set free meant Jesus had to stay away from Jerusalem as long as was possible. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke make it clear that Jesus did not go near the capital city until that fateful time we call Holy Week.

So it is that Jesus, having concluded His preparation in the wilderness is about to begin His public ministry. With no assurance of how long He would survive, there was an *immediacy* and *urgency* to the call of disciples. We heard in the last month of John the Baptist's disciples, and we can assume Jesus was following in a long standing tradition when he chose special and specific men to accompany Him in all He was called to say and do in the name of the Almighty God. Jesus needed good men quickly, and somehow He conveyed the immediacy with His words, perhaps with His appearance or sense of self-assurance. Whatever charisma pulled at these men's inner beings worked, for they *immediately* left their boats and followed Jesus.

First, we are presented with a Divine example of how something that is immediate if not urgent can be presented in a persuasive way that precludes high volume, eye and ear catching sensations and entertainment value. This stands in contradiction to the theory that to convince people to be persons of faith and attend church, that worship needs to be flashy, loud, and highly entertaining.

But there is much more to this message, for the second example of a matter that bore a degree of immediacy and import is found in our reading from 1 Corinthians. Last Sunday, we were treated to the first nine verses of Paul's Letter to the Christians in Corinth - to Paul's affirmation and proclamation of his faith in Jesus Christ. Today's lesson immediately follows those words and we get right to the heart of what Paul needed to say at that moment to this early Christian assemblage. We need to remember that Paul's letters, which predate the composition of the Gospels, were written to specific persons for specific reasons, to communities encountering particular questions if not crises of faith - and yet, for better or worse, we discover that Paul's words to people who lived just under two thousand years ago are just as timely if not as urgent and immediate for us today as was true back then. Listen to Paul as he shares his concern about disunity within the early church. Appropriate to today's discourse on immediacy and urgency, listen to how Paul gives voice to his admonitions without resorting to in-your-face tactics:

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Disunity. How timely - if not immediate and urgent – how timely it would be to calmly read that passage to the people of Kenya or the people of Iraq where people are determined to see and identify themselves as members of different tribes, different religious sects or ethnic groupings

instead of as citizens of a country - and how disunity if not hatred will only render more bloodshed and more heartache.

Disunity. How timely it is to hear Paul's appeal as peoples around this country go to the polls to vote in primaries or attend political caucuses - because some candidates – and yes the wonderful “press” - are trying and succeeding in drawing lines between the races, between and among different age groups, and as ever, along religious lines. We hear words about the Jewish vote, the Muslim vote, the Catholic vote, the Evangelical Protestant vote, men versus women, black versus white, Hispanic, Asian, is not a message about unity not only timely - but urgent and immediate - and can we not take our cues from Jesus the Christ and Paul the Apostle who made their claims, called people to faithfulness, and never did so with raised voices or theatrical presentations? Indeed, Paul poses an intriguing question early in this Letter to the Christians in Corinth. At the end of the fourth chapter, in the middle of his admonitions, Paul asks:

What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

More than sixty years ago, an American Baptist Professor from the Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, The Rev. Dr. Winthrop Hudson, pulled what in retrospect was a pretty good feat. South of Rochester, in the Village of Warsaw, two large brick churches, built by the same architect and builder but one year apart, stood but ninety feet from each other in the middle of the Village. Originally a single Presbyterian congregation, there was a split in 1840 over several issues. Both congregations remained part of the Reformed Tradition - Congregational and Presbyterian. In 1943, more than hundred years after the division, both pulpits were vacant at the same time as one Pastor had retired and the other had gone to serve as a Chaplain during the Second World War. Dr. Hudson managed to be named interim at *both* churches. Then, one Sunday, just hours apart, he preached the same sermon in the two pulpits. To paraphrase his message:

"In a world gone mad by division and war [remember this is in the middle of World War II and there was no assurance the allies would win in 1943] - in a world gone mad by division and war, why are two congregations, from the same reformed tradition, much less both Christian, ... why are you two congregations not one?"

Speaking to the retired Dr. Hudson in 1994 on the occasion of the United Church of Warsaw's 50th Anniversary, I neglected to ask him what passage of Scripture he used on that Sunday in 1943, but would not the portion of Paul's Letter that I just read - would that not have been appropriate? Dr. Hudson's summons to unity had an immediate effect. Within a year, the congregation was united under New York State law and with both denominations' blessings.

Would that the message of unity be that easy - or that immediate - or taken that urgently - by peoples of the world - or peoples of the church. Would that Christ's call to discipleship, Paul's message to be one in Christ, and our Creator's call to all of us to be the family of God - no matter our tribe, no matter our race, no matter our name, no matter our history - would that the call be recognized for its urgency, seen for its immediacy, and embraced with the vigor that calls us to know Christ, live Christ and share Christ in all that we say and in all that we do.

Amen.