

<Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Luke 4:21-30>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

There was once a young, new minister. He was fresh out of seminary, and full of excitement for his first call. He landed with a small congregation with an historic building in its community, and went into it with all the fresh ideas that come with recent seminary graduation and ordination. Most of these were not in the manner of, "I'm the ordained minister, and I know best," but in the sense of "I have innovation and thoughts on how we can be the best church in this day and age!"

One of those innovative ideas, of course, had to do with the placement of the furniture in the chancel, specifically one of the extra chairs that was unused. This new minister was still so new that he didn't recognize that one does not simply walk into the chancel and move furniture. As such, he took this chair and, didn't remove it all together, but shifted it about six feet over toward the wall from where it had been.

You can probably imagine a degree of the reaction to that move. The minister certainly did not need to imagine; he heard it all. And he learned, with stinging awareness, that one does not simply move a chair. By the following week, all furniture was back "in its proper place."

Where was this young minister's mistake? Perhaps if we look at a similar situation from a different, but more familiar story.

This story actually begins last week, as we joined Jesus when he went to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth.

On that occasion, Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, in which he searched out the call of Isaiah as the prophet began to preach anew to the people of God returned from exile. On that occasion, Isaiah was speaking to the people as they began again to live as God's people, and the call upon Isaiah reflected the call upon them all as they reclaimed the nature of what they were about in this world. For Jesus, it is not just a reminder of God's call in the past but an affirmation of the ministry he is about to undertake: good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, the year of the Lord's favor...in short, the restoration of all that is out of balance, the realization of the very Kingdom of God. Jesus defines his ministry in the terms of God's historic vision and proclamation, aligning himself with what has already been proclaimed and determined.

And, as we read last week, Jesus finishes by declaring that this vision is now fulfilled in their hearing. And the people are amazed, seemingly with joyous wonder. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

The message, and all that it stood for, uplifted and amazed the people, giving them hope and energy for what was potentially to come. Until.

Until they remembered and had the realization of, "hey, don't we know this Jesus? Didn't he grow up here? Don't we remember how he used to chase the chickens, and how he hit his thumb with his dad's hammer that one day and cried? Don't we *know him?*" And then, the hope and the energy and the potential of Jesus' message, his proclamation of ministry, was lost in the assumption of 'don't we know him, and know better? He can't proclaim these things; he's too young, and too familiar.' And so the message was lost. After some back-and-forth, the people there in the synagogue have moved from hope and energy and amazement to furor and rage, with intent to hurl him from a cliff at the edge of town.

What happened? Where was the mistake in these two stories? In truth, there isn't one single mistake or error to point to; as is often the case, there are a number of factors at work and influencing one another. But generally speaking, two of the primary ones are: trying to do too much, too fast; and coming up against a group's cognitive bias. And failing to take either of these into account often leads to an insurmountable challenge.

In our first story of the young minister, he very much tried to do too much, too fast, without yet realizing the dynamics of working within an organization. He sees a chair that, in his opinion, should be several feet over in order to more effectively facilitate preaching and worship engagement, so he moves it. And while it is an innocuous move, it represents a sudden and unexpected change, which the congregation is not ready for. They resist, with a great deal of energy, not because the position of the unused chair really matters but because they weren't prepared for so much difference all at once.

In our gospel reading, this dynamic is evident - Jesus proclaims the fulfillment of all that the people have hoped and longed for! - and at first that is joyously received, until it sinks in what that represents, and how different the world will now be. It turns into too much, too fast, and it is compounded with the cognitive bias of the members of the synagogue, viewing Jesus with a child-like perception. They can only see Jesus as the child they remember him as, not the adult he now is, and certainly not the fulfillment of Isaiah's proclamation as he has proclaimed.

Looking forward in life, whether it be for growth and change, a mission or ministry endeavor, or even just growing up, we humans have a tendency to think in terms of, "one day I'll just know," or "at this point, I'll know I've achieved." Our children talk about what they'll do and who they'll be when they grow up, and more and more I keep thinking to myself, "I wonder what I'll do when I grow up." When we look ahead, when we look toward the future, we often imagine the end result, the realized effort. But what we often don't see is all the tiny little, sometimes infinitesimally small steps between now and then. The everyday efforts that lead us to achieving the vision, which are often so everyday that they are confused as mundane instead of holy. But our minds subconsciously recognize this, which is why, I think, it's jarring to us when we feel as if

we're suddenly presented with the finished product or the fulfilled dream. Especially when that dream is something that has been long yearned for and anticipated.

We see this echoed in Jeremiah's calling to be a prophet. Finding himself suddenly in the presence of the Divine, Jeremiah at first despairs, thinking he will surely be struck dead, as he is a boy of unclean lips. Then, when God proclaims that Jeremiah will go to the people, he protests, saying, "Lord, I am just a boy who does not know how to speak." God, of course, has a response to that: 'do not say, I am only a boy, for I am sending you, I will go with you; I knew you before you were even formed in the womb...I have put my words in your mouth.' And though this was all true, and Jeremiah was now called, it took him time to see himself in that role, to effect the proclamation placed upon him.

We know how these stories of our faith turn out. Jeremiah proclaims hope, repentance, correction, and promise to the people of God, enabling them to live faithfully during exile and then return to the land as the people of God anew. Jesus is able to make his way through an angry crowd of familiar faces and move on from Nazareth, with a new recognition that sometimes you just can't get over the reality that a home town will always see you as the kid you once were. And as for that young minister? He walked away from the debacle of moving the chair with a new understanding of ministry, but certainly with no less commitment.

You see, over the next few months, he slowly moved the chair an inch or so at a time, and sometimes not even at all. His work at shifting furniture in the chancel was so slight, so incremental but so steady, that before anyone realized it, the chair was no longer in its "customary" position but in its new spot, which everyone agreed really was a better place for it.

This is our work. We may sometimes think we'd love to see the fully-formed, realized vision spring forth, but that would also be terrifying. In reality, we are called to lend our hands to the slow, everyday work that may only happen in small increments, but which happens consistently. Calling someone we haven't seen for a while. Lending a hand for a few hours with a mission organization. Committing in each day to be someone who carries a word of hope, looking for the occasion to offer it.

God is at work in our lives, each and every day. God is present in this congregation, each and every day. And the Spirit of God continues to guide and direct our ministry and mission, sometimes in leaps and bounds, such as when a building is commissioned or a minister is called, and much of the time in everyday, almost routine opportunities to practice the gospel and offer a word of hope, a word of comfort and good news. This is as much our calling as anything else, and perhaps even more so. Go, and proclaim the good news of the gospel. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*