

John Docherty, January 31, 2016

Where I send you, you must go

The theme of this morning's service, taken from the Lectionary suggestion, is "Where I send you, you must go".

The suggested readings, two of which were read, include the call to Jeremiah, and the incident in Nazareth where Jesus, more or less, began his ministry.

The first of these two passages, from Jeremiah, introduces us to a young prophet who is reluctant to take up the mantle of responsibility that God wants to give him. He tries to beg off by noting his youth, and, as Moses did before him, pointing out that he lacked eloquence :

"Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

He's metaphorically slapped down, of course. God reminds him that "... 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' ..."

God has a message for those nations, and God has a message for this young man : "I have a message that needs to be shared, and I need a voice with which to announce this message. I won't rumble from the clouds, and I won't set the earth trembling to get my point across. I will speak in a human voice, and that voice is yours. Where I send you, you will go."

Jeremiah could have then responded with something like "okay, okay, but we already have the ten commandments and a whole list of do's and don'ts – what more do we need?"

To which God could then have responded with something like "yes, you already have the ten commandments and a whole list of do's and don'ts – but you're in need of some further nuance to help you understand the spirit of the whole thing. What's written is clear, but my people seem to need some help applying what they have to their current situation."

The second passage we read introduces us to another young prophet making his debut in the synagogue of Nazareth, the place of his birth. This isn't quite his first steps in ministry – we're told that he's already been speaking in various synagogues in other

villages – but this is the moment when he makes it clear that he has a mission and a message that will disturb the status quo.

This prophet is not as young, nor as shy, as Jeremiah, and he seems clearly ready to go wherever God's leading takes him, both physically and figuratively. He pushes the envelope so hard at Nazareth, that his ministry is almost over before it's properly begun. We're told in verse 29 of the passage that "... They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff ..."

Part of the reason for this violent reaction seems to be the implied criticism in his words - "... Elijah wasn't sent to a widow of Israel, but to a widow of Sidon; Elisha didn't heal lepers in Israel, but only a Syrian leper ..." And, by extension, the message seems to be that God's blessings aren't monopolized by Israel – God is quite capable of turning their expectations upside down.

Jesus was challenging their understanding of what was "right", right from the start.

He was forcing them to read and hear their scriptures through new eyes and ears : "... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing ..."

It's a bit of a recurring theme in Jesus' attempts to get people to : "... let him who has eyes to see, see, and ears to hear, hear ..."

In other words, "... what you are taking for granted needs to be examined afresh, and you need to be prepared to go where God is sending you, both physically, and, perhaps more importantly, spiritually. You have the scriptures there in front of you. You know what they say. You have a certain understanding of what they mean. Now you need to see and hear them while being attentive to the Spirit (capital S) behind them ..."

Because the challenge is to be faithful to the text of scripture, while being attentive to the promptings of the Spirit that may appear to be at odds with what you think the scripture is saying.

It's a troubling habit of Jesus' : although he has "gracious words", as per the passage from Luke, he is also constantly doing, paradoxically, what would certainly be seen to be sin in the eyes of the people, or he is engaging in culturally and religiously unsavoury behaviour:

- he eats and drinks with publicans and sinners, contaminating himself in the eyes of the righteous
- he touches lepers, making himself ceremoniously unclean

- he 'works' on the Sabbath, in direct violation of the Law
- he converses with women; worse, he converses with Samaritan women
- he upends tables in the courtyard of the temple in a fit of rage
- he tells stories about good guys – neighbours – who are not Jews, but Samaritans (bad guys)
- he even has something of a reputation as a glutton and a drunkard (check out Matthew 11 and Luke 7)

As far as most of the Jews of his day are concerned, he's something of an enigma – a prophet who claims to fulfill the law, while appearing to break it.

How can he possibly be from God if he is clearly something of an anarchist; or even worse – a blasphemer?

How can you trust a prophet who twists everything around to confuse you?

How can you follow someone who undermines everything you've ever believed with statements like : “... you've heard it said that ... but I tell you ...”

What do you do with a man like that?

Well, you can simply ignore him and get on with your life.

You can embrace his call and start on the way to where he is sending you spiritually.

Or, you can crucify him.

You start by taking him out to a hill on the outskirts of town and try to toss him headlong over a cliff, and you finish by nailing him to a cross.

Unfortunately, by getting rid of Jesus, you don't get rid of the challenge of being faithful to the text of scripture while being attentive to the Spirit (with a capital S) behind it.

And you don't stop the on-going work of the Spirit as each generation grapples with its obligation to understand what it means to love God with the whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love one's neighbour as ones' self.

Even the apostle Peter, that hard-headed fisherman, is forced to come to terms with this imperative to go, both physically and spiritually, where God was sending him, even though it flew in the face of everything he had been taught to believe.

In the 10th chapter of the Book of Acts, he has a vision in which a sheet is lowered from Heaven, containing "... all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air ...". He then hears a voice telling him to eat, to which he responds that he has never eaten anything unclean. The voice says "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean."

He is pushed to move spiritually, though this seems contradictory to the Law.

He then receives an invitation to travel to Caesarea, to visit Cornelius, a gentile. The voice tells him to go, though, as he tells them in Caesarea, "you yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit any one of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean."

He is pushed to move physically, though this is clearly against the Law.

Later, in the 15th chapter of Acts, the believers gathered there have to grapple with the entry of Gentiles to the faith. The Law seems to clearly require that they be circumcised and basically be converted to Judaism, under the full obligation of obeying the Law of Moses, and some of those in Jerusalem are pushing strongly for this position.

But the leaders of the church conclude that God is pushing them in another direction spiritually, in spite of what the Law seems to require, and that the only "burden" to be placed on the Gentiles is that they abstain from food sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what is strangled, and from unchastity.

The Spirit of God is at work, and fashioning a new understanding of faithful living.

It's a delicate balance, this business of attending to the seemingly contradictory promptings of the Spirit of God while attempting to be faithful to how the scriptures have always been understood and interpreted.

It requires, I think, a heart that is both resolute in seeking after truth, and yet capable of subtlety of nuance that may sometimes appear to border on sophistry. The risk of self-deception is enormous when one's passions and aspirations interfere with an honest assessment of the true source of that small quiet voice inside.

Is it the Spirit of God sending us somewhere new, spiritually, or is it our own clouded judgment clamouring for attention? How do we know that this, or that, course of action or position is the right one? We have scriptures that spell out certain things for us, but we also have the Spirit of God acting in an on-going way.

Part of the answer to the dilemma lies, I think, somewhere in this 15th chapter of the Book of Acts. We read of the whole church coming together to sort the questions out.

The general mass of believers is involved, as are the apostles and elders. But it's not a smooth, gentle, non-conflictual process of nodding heads and easy consensus.

Throughout the Book of Acts, whenever there is mention of discussion around a particular course of action, or a need for a decision that affects this new faith, we read words like dissension; debate; sharp contention; murmurs; criticized. We Christians aren't always the sheep we're portrayed to be.

But I think this is simply indicative of the reality of gathering any body of persons together to agree on how best to follow God, and to go where God is sending us spiritually. We are passionate about our faith, and we are not always on the same page.

And because of that diversity of perception of faithfulness, elsewhere, in the first letter of John, chapter 4, we read this :

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God : every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God.”

Now, frankly, this particular definition of how to know the Spirit of God seems to me to be of only limited usefulness in our time : I know plenty of people who will acknowledge that Jesus is an historical character – that he came in the flesh – but who will not go any further than that.

As an aside, just before Christmas, Mary-Lou asked our seven-year old grandson if he'd like us to read him a story. He said he'd like to read “the Jesus book” (a children's story Bible we have). On the way over to the shelf to get the book, he asked Mary-Lou “Nana, was Jesus a real person?”, to which Mary-Lou replied, “yes, he really lived as a real person.”

He then turned to his big brother, who apparently has other thoughts on the matter, and said “in yo face, sucka!”

A refreshingly honest outward expression of what some of us might be feeling inside when we think we have the upper hand in some of our church discussions ...

But the first part of the quote from 1st John is, I think, far more useful : test the spirits.

In other words, listen to each other; take seriously what each of you believes to be true; weigh the various perspectives and understandings; and together seek to discern (to use

the language of chapter 15 of the Book of Acts) “... what has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...”

Because I am convinced that this Book is both a guide to faithful belief, and a testament to the struggle of God's people to find their way through the murkiness of that faithfulness. Much of this Book is a collection of myriad voices that are sometimes contradictory; sometimes violent; sometimes poetically sensitive; and sometimes simply tedious in their narrow-mindedness.

But it is a history of a very human desire to seek after truth, and a complement to the work of listening to the Spirit of God.

A history of a people struggling to obey God's call : “Where I send you, you must go”.