

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Mary Ann Goetz at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, on Celebration Sunday, Sept. 12, 2010.

“Called to Teach”

Luke 15:1-10

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, excitement is in the air. Our choir is back and let me say loudly and publicly, **you have been missed!** Amen!

Today, Sunday school has started after weeks spent in planning and working on curriculum. Thanks to Mark Williams who has been working diligently from his home as he has been healing from cancer. And thanks to Jackie Dean, our interim Christian educator, who has been the gentle strength, the wise and spiritual leader, guiding the education committees toward this day.

And while we are thanking people, I know that all of us want to thank the Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson. Next Sunday, she will be returning to the pulpit to preach and the following Sunday, our senior minister, the Rev. Tim Ahrens will be returning from his sabbatical.

About Janine, she loved us before she really knew us and after getting to know us, she still loves us. Her ministry among us has been one of love, compassion, wisdom and amazing strength given to her by the God who called her to ministry and sent her to us. As a congregation we thank you Janine and look forward to your

continued love and leadership here at First Congregational United Church of Christ.

Today we celebrate with great anticipation our new opportunities for ministry. Toward the end of the service, as a people so loved by God and as a people called by God, we will process out from this grand “cathedral of grace,” as Rev. Tim would call it, to an empty lot – an empty lot yes, but an empty lot full all sorts of possibilities.

Our sermon text for today is from St. Luke 15:1-10. There is no chapter in the New Testament so well known and so dearly loved as this 15th chapter of Luke’s Gospel. It has been called “the gospel in the gospel” as it contains the very essence of the “good news” that Jesus Christ came to teach us. In it, we read of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son as Jesus teaches us in these parables about the “lost and found.” This the very essence of the “good news.” Today we will be reading verses 1-10 only.

Imagine with me now that you are there watching this master teacher teach. Jesus, the master teacher – who teaches to the test. He knows his students well; he even knows their hearts. Some of the “students” are sitting on the ground; some are leaning against a rock or a stump of a tree and there toward the back of the crowd, but close enough, are some fancy looking students with their arms folded in front of them – almost daring Jesus to teach them anything.

“Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost. Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who

repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.' ” The lost has been found!

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." The lost has been found!

May we pray: Eternal God, in the reading of the scriptures, may your word be heard; in the meditations of our hearts, may your word be known; and in the faithfulness of our lives, may your word be shown. Amen

I love this time of year! Besides all the renewed activities here at church, school has started! Parents give an audible sigh of relief and teachers take up their positions on the front line of education, they are ready to launch.

It's not that all teachers come back rested and renewed from their summer break, no, because many of them have been students themselves. They've been working on advanced degrees like our own Mary Weaver has, or they have been taking methods courses to enhance their teaching skills. Teachers are amazing! They too are called to the lost and found.

For the last 14 years as a school nurse in Columbus City Schools, I have had the opportunity to observe teachers up close, and teaching is indeed a call in their lives; teachers are called to teach! That's what I want to talk about today – call. What is it? Who gets it and where does it come from?

When students come in to see me, to just talk, I like to talk to them about what they're studying and to talk about their teachers. If I know some interesting fact about their teacher, I like to share it with them.

Jared, not his real name, came out of a class one day to see me and I asked him, “What class did you come from?”

“I came from Dr. Brown’s (her real name) class.”

“So you have Dr. Brown,” I said.

Then I asked him, “Did you know that Dr. Brown was a rocket scientist?”

“No way” Jared said.

“She sure was” I replied. “She was an engineer for NASA and now she is *your* teacher.”

“You’re kidding,” he replied, “Why’d she do that? Who’d want to be a teacher anyway. . . . kids are . . .” He launched off on all the reasons why he would never be a teacher.

“Jared, Dr. Brown was ‘called to teach,’ called to teach you and other students.”

“Called,” he said. “Who called her? Did they call her on the phone?”

This was going to be harder than I thought.

He asked again, “Who called her?”

Then I just had to say it, “God called Dr. Brown – to be a teacher, to be your teacher.”

God? Jared gave me a blank look and out of my office he went.

Call, calling, called . . . what is it?

We read in Genesis that God called the world into being; we read of the call of Moses in Exodus chapter 3; Samuel’s call from God in 1st Samuel chapter 3; and Isaiah writes in the 6th chapter of

the book of Isaiah, “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send and who will go for us? Then I said, ‘Here I am Lord! Send me!’ ” In all the stories of call, the common response is, “Here I am Lord.” They make it look so easy!

Calling, defined by Webster’s, is “a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action especially when accompanied by a conviction of divine influence.”

John R. Coats, a seminary professor writes “to think of call only in the context of a call to divine service is too small.” Calling has to do with “spirit” and in both the Hebrew (*ruach*) and the Greek (*pneuma*), the word “spirit” can be rendered as breath or breath of life, that breathing in and breathing out of that which inspires – may I say the Holy Spirit. Dr. Coats continues, “In human experience, that sort of transaction, that inspiration, overflows the confines of what we have come to think of as religion.” Ask a physician, ask a coach, a nurse and a musician, ask yourself . . . a call in your life – yes!

James Hillman, a famous Jungian analyst writes, “Sooner or later something seems to call us in a particular path . . . we bear from the start – the image of a definite individual character with some enduring traits – each of us enters the world called.” Called yes, but to what and at what price?

Kahlil Gibran writes:

Call is life longing for itself
Call is about listening and following
Calls are essentially questions
Calls are about our response to them
Calls keep returning until we answer them

“A call might be toward whatever we’ve dared and double-dared ourselves to do for as long as we can remember,” writes Greg Levoy in his excellent book *Callings*.

To what and to where are *you* being called? In the quiet of your thoughts and prayers, is God speaking to you in a voice that sounds very much like your own voice? Is God speaking to you through a friend who sees your gifts clearer than you see your own? Your call could come as a phone call – from this church even – as someone says to you, we need you.

In the past, you might have said, “I’ll serve if I am asked –I’ll serve if I am invited.” I’ll take that invitation as a sign, you might say, that that’s where God wants me to serve. Then please consider this your invitation to serve! If we were in say a Pentecostal or evangelical church, this is the place in the service where we might have an altar call – to serve.

To where and to what is God calling you this very day? What is your response?

Now does God call groups of people, yes – scripture tells of God’s call to the Israelite community. Does God call groups of people, say like a congregation, say like this congregation?

Several years ago, there was a popular book written by Dr. Bruce Wilkerson, founder and president of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries. The book was entitled *The Prayer of Jabez*. It was based on a short and simple prayer found in 1 Chronicles 4:10: “And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, ‘Oh that You would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory, that your hand would be with me.’”

I know that someone or maybe more than someone in this congregation has been praying that prayer, the prayer of Jabez.

“Oh, that you would bless *us* indeed and enlarge our territory, that your hand would be with *us* . . .” And God has answered that prayer – our territory has been enlarged indeed!

I see that answered prayer as a call to this congregation and we celebrate that call today! God has called this congregation, First Congregational, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, to a new

ministry, in this place, in this Discovery District – to a new ministry that will be revealed in God’s time.

God’s time, yes, but we can't help from wondering what that ministry will be – how and to what is God calling this congregation of believers?

Could our gospel lesson for today give us any hint? This “gospel in the gospel,” this gospel that contains the very essence of the “good news” that Jesus Christ came to teach us about?

Jesus’ ministry was all about the “lost and the found” of humanity. His ministry was to and for those marginalized people, those people isolated from society by poverty, illness and social class.

The very essence of his ministry, of his work on earth, was about the lost, the found and you know, maybe that can be our ministry too. Is that where God is calling us – to the lost and found?

And oh, how about the sermon title – “Called to Teach?” Most of us will not be on the front line of education, the classroom. It’s not our call. But you see – we all teach by our lives – wherever we are called.

May we glorify You always Lord – with our lives. Amen.