

Epiphany 4, Year C
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Author and Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner has a quote that is often cited when people are trying to figure out what to do with their lives. He says, **“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”** It is a lovely sentiment and one that is true for some people. If one listens attentively to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, one might find that God is calling you to a life in which who you are and what you do fit together seamlessly while benefiting the wider world. I can see how this might be the case for Lin-Manuel Miranda, playwright, composer, and lyricist for the hit musical *Hamilton*; for the altruistic people who are part of Doctors without Borders; for teachers who change the lives of their students; and for creative geniuses like Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple. Such a vocation does not mean that their work is easy, but it does mean that it is an authentic expression of who they are and a positive good for others.

For other people, the call to follow faithfully where God leads is better expressed in a second Buechner quote: **“Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid.”** This is the case

for God's call to the prophets, who were sent to speak God's truth when God's people would not listen. From Moses to Jeremiah the note of reluctance to say yes to such a call is clear. Both were sent to speak truth to power, at clear risk to them. Neither felt qualified. Moses pointed out a speech impediment. Jeremiah said, **"Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."** Neither of them had their call presented as optional. Moses and Jeremiah were told that God was in charge, both of their ability to speak, and the words they would need to say. They were also promised that they would not be alone in the work they were given to do. God said to Jeremiah, **"Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you."** One has to wonder how reassuring that statement was, as it might have left him wondering, **'Deliver me from what?'** Since both men experienced the attempts of others to kill them, we know their callings were high risk and required deliverance.

In the Gospel reading last week we heard Jesus declare his own vocation by claiming the words of the prophet Isaiah as his personal mission statement: **"...he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the**

Lord's favour." The initial response to his announcement, which had been preceded by very good press about his ministry in a neighboring town, was quite positive. But the tone changed when Jesus identified himself as a prophet. The task of the prophet is to critique in the name of God. To make this point clear, Jesus reminds the people of two stories from their history when God's prophets were the vehicles of miracles for people who were not Israelites—for people who were, in fact, their enemies. They reacted as if he had spit on them. Jesus, like Moses and Jeremiah, had been chosen from before his birth to tell God's truth to God's people. They did not want to hear it; instead they rejected him and tried to kill him. It became a pattern throughout Jesus' ministry that would eventually lead to his death. The big difference between Moses, Jeremiah, and Jesus, is that Jesus—being God in the flesh—volunteered for this. Only Jesus could alter the outcome of a pattern in which humans are so stuck in our way of understanding God, that we cannot open our hearts and minds to change. It is far easier to cling to our desire to be right and to reject those who challenge us, than it is to learn from them, or wonder whether they might actually speak for God.

What would it look like to be people who seek to keep an open heart and mind, knowing that God might speak through others who are different from us? I think it would look a lot what Paul describes in his First Letter to the Corinthians. People are so used to hearing this beautiful testimony about love at weddings that it is easy to forget that it was written by Paul for a Christian community that was notorious for its inability to get along with each other. Paul compares their treasured spiritual gifts to love, asserting that the value of any ability crumbles in contrast to love. There is nothing more important than love. And what does real love look like? Paul says,

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

How could we become people who build a foundation in love? It may sound sappy or sentimental or soft to talk about love as THE primary call of God's people, but there are two passages in the New Testament in addition to Paul's words that are very clear about why this is so. The simplest is in 1 John: **God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.** The second is when Jesus is asked to

prioritize the commandments of God, to which he responds: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.”** The good news is that this kind of love is not something we are expected to conjure up in ourselves. We are given the gift of the Holy Spirit at baptism, so God’s love already resides in us. Our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to do everything we can to nurture that love. That is why we are called to pray and worship together, to receive the Holy Eucharist, to serve in the world, and to read and ponder the Scriptures. We are given countless opportunities to learn, to be sustained, to practice, to be challenged, and to grow in love. Like the prophets of God, this is not a calling that is presented to us as optional. God is love and we are the people of God, so we are called to be people who both share that love and are transformed by it.

Amen