

“Sent Ones”  
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17  
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Have you ever noticed that on some Sundays  
there seems to be a certain zip in the air after worship?  
We always gather in the Gathering Space for lemonade and cookies,  
but sometimes there is an added energy.  
You hear it in the conversations and in people’s laughter.  
In some people you can see it in the way they move.  
I sometimes close my eyes and just attend to the sound of it,  
and Robert may comment on it as we are going home.  
Given that I have been worshiping or leading services for over 40 years  
I have seen it time and again, and I am going to take the risk  
of saying what I think is going on.  
I think that certain energy is what happens  
when people have made a real connection with the Holy Spirit.  
It isn’t necessarily a conscious thing that anyone’s aware of  
but I think at times we get up from the service knowing  
that we are not just leaving, we have been *sent*.

Today is the last Sunday in our series on worship.  
We have been following and learning from our church’s Directory for Worship,  
a slender section of our constitution, *The Book of Order*,  
which describes rather than dictates  
what the elements of worship are.  
I have put the elements of worship on the cover of the bulletin  
for you to see in print, and today’s topic is the last one on the list,  
the one with the not very elegant title  
“Relating to Each Other and the World.”<sup>i</sup>

Perhaps today’s scriptures seem a bit odd given the topic.  
We don’t hear from the book of Jeremiah very often  
and not many of us are likely to connect Jeremiah’s story with our own.  
For one thing, he was a great prophet  
and most of us don’t equate ourselves with greatness.  
For another, he was often miserable,  
suffering both when he did and when he didn’t follow God’s commands.  
No one wants to be miserable, especially not when it comes to faith,  
so it is all too easy to hear the story of Jeremiah’s call  
as some sort of sideline, or piece of faith history,  
not as a story that describes our lives  
or what we’re called to do here and now.

Though that may be how we often feel however,  
it is not how we behave.

Every Sunday, we do a several things in worship  
that indicate that we do not just get up and go home when worship ends.  
At the close of every service we are sent in to the world  
with a mandate as clear as Jeremiah's  
that calls for action and response.

All of us are called weekly to share what we discover  
each time we worship God.

Last week the entire sermon was about self-offering.

This week the emphasis is on God's act of sending us into the world.

It is hard to say where exactly in worship this sending begins.

It may begin as soon as we offer hospitality,  
greeting each other and welcoming those who are new among us  
It may begin when we open up to each other in prayer  
with our concerns and celebrations.

You can't talk about people you love who need prayer and support,  
or events in the community that gladden or upset,  
without beginning to turn your face somewhat  
toward all that lies outside our doors.

The offering is another obvious moment  
when the world outside comes into the room.

The money we put in the plates or give electronically  
not only pays staff salaries and utility bills,  
office costs and maintenance fees,  
it puts food on people's tables, clothes on their backs,  
gas in their cars, medicine in their veins, and counsel in their minds.

It may put hospital or clinic beds under their bodies  
along with the care of doctors, nurses and technicians.

In schools that we support it puts learning in their heads,  
job training in their hands, trauma relief in their hearts,  
and it does this here in Montgomery County  
and on the streets of Dhaka in Bangladesh  
or the villages of Guatemala and Malawi.

But even aside from the work that our dollars do,  
can anyone reach into his or her wallet without feeling the pull  
from an outer world that tells a *very* different story  
about money than the story that is told in this room?

Last week in worship we commissioned the youth and their leaders  
for a week together with hundreds of other kids in Montreat.

They came back yesterday after a wonderful week.

Today we are going to commission three people to go to Guatemala,  
Kendra Crabtree, Peg Warren, and Renae Gillie, for a week with CEDEPCA.  
Commissioning is our way to prepare people  
for experiences and things God is sending them to do in the world.  
We also send out people who are moving into a new phase in life.  
They are moving out from us with God's blessing and love.  
We'll be doing that today, too, as we send Nathan Stowe  
who's worshiped with us for six years off to his new job and life in California.

But no matter what else happens in any service  
by the time we are singing the last hymn,  
we are definitely taking part in an act of sending  
that moves us from the peace and reassurance of worship  
to the lives that we lead during the rest of the week.  
That's why so many closing hymns have a final verse about  
living one's faith in action, as today's closing hymn does throughout.

The formal moment of sending is the Charge.  
The Charge isn't always listed in the bulletin, but it always happens.  
The most common language for the charge "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,"  
isn't strictly biblical. It's a condensed version of several sayings  
in the writings of Paul and First Peter.  
The long version is "Go out into the world in peace,  
have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil;  
strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak,  
help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve the Lord,  
rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit."  
You can see why ministers feel free to extemporize, as I often do.  
But whatever is said, we are all charged to engage  
in obedient and grateful ministry  
as God's agents to heal life's brokenness.

In today's story in Luke Jesus heals a woman during worship.  
She doesn't ask to be healed. She doesn't say one word.  
Jesus does the talking and in an instant  
the woman is freed from an affliction that had bound her for 18 years.  
The leader of the synagogue quickly protests.  
He is a tow-the-line kind of guy and healing is a form of work  
so it shouldn't be done on the Sabbath, he protests.  
A few others present seem to agree with him.  
Jesus gets furious with them for not understanding what kind of people  
the people of God are called to be,  
agents of all kinds of healing, in worship and beyond.

It just might be that people who don't come to church don't come  
because of what happens in worship in the last two minutes.

They may like to sing hymns or hear others do it.

They may be perfectly willing to listen to a sermon  
as long as it is engaging and not too long.

What they don't want is to be charged to *do* anything  
about what they've heard.

Being charged to do God's work is intolerable to people  
who are convinced that they are the only ones in charge.

The truth is I have some sympathy for such resistance.

As we heard last week, being God's agent is not the kind of thing  
you can do without God's help.

And there is help available.

In the story of Jeremiah's call, God makes it clear  
that Jeremiah does not have to rely on his own power.

Neither do we, and that is where the Benediction comes in.

The Benediction is a blessing designed to empower everyone  
for everything we face outside these doors.

Here at Blacksburg Presbyterian we are good at Benedictions.

I have been in churches where as soon as the minister's hands went up  
heads dropped and all eyes closed  
as if the congregation were ducking a blow.

Now, many of you were raised to bow your head, and if that is your pattern  
please hear me: There is no wrong way to receive a benediction.

But the fact of the matter is that the Benediction is a gift  
and when you are being given a gift, you don't usually look away.

You look toward the giver with expectation,  
and in this case the Giver is God.

Jeremiah knew that being empowered by God  
was not going to be a picnic.

He protested as honestly as anyone ever has,  
even saying he wasn't old enough for the job of prophet.

But it didn't do him a bit of good.

"Do not say 'I am only a boy,'" said God

"For you shall go to all to whom I send you..."

Lutheran Bishop Stephen Boumen tells a story

about the charge that we all have to take what happens in worship  
to the larger world.<sup>i</sup>

His congregation in New Jersey welcomed the poor and homeless.

The church was adopted by Edgar,  
a man who by any standard was a strange character.

Edgar lived in a nearby welfare hotel.

In worship he would sit in the first pew  
and if he didn't like what Bauman was saying in a sermon

he'd laugh and interject:

"You don't mean that, do you?"

Edgar, writes Pastor Boumen, "Pushed our understanding of what we mean when we say that all God's children are welcome."

On occasion Edgar got loud and demanding.

So Boumen's heart sank one Palm Sunday  
after a full day of services and pastoral intensity.  
when Edgar wanted a ride home.

On the ride to the motel Edgar talked and talked  
until Boumen had to pray for patience.

Then they pulled into the parking lot of the run-down motor inn  
by the George Washington Bridge.

A door opened and an elderly woman emerged.

She knocked on another door and another elderly woman came out.

They limped toward the car.

Other people from a nearby garage came forward  
until the car was surrounded.

That was when Boumen finally noticed  
that Edgar had a fist full of palm branches.

He had promised his neighbors he would bring them palms from church.

Boumen realized that Edgar was the only one  
who had ever passed for a pastor in that neighborhood.

Edgar handed a palm through the window

to a woman who knew who her pastor was.

She clutched it as if she had been given something precious  
and she called the waiting group over to the windows of the van.

"Get out of the car," said Edgar.

By this time, Bouman writes, he was dumb struck.

"Get out of the car," Edgar said again. "Give them the palms!"

And so Boumen distributed palms to those who were waiting.

"Bless them," Edgar demanded. And Boumen did.

"I placed my hands on each forehead," he writes,  
and pronounced the benediction." AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> *Book of Order 2015-2017, The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Part II, The Office of the General Assembly, Louisville KY, p 87 and 101.*

<sup>ii</sup> The story about Edgar comes from Lutheran Bishop Stephen Boumen's sermon "Low Rent Righteousness," delivered on the Protestant Hour on September 26, 1999.