



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis
October 22, 2017 Sermon

I Am With You, Follow Me

Jeremiah 1:4-10, Matthew 19:16-22

Intro to Scripture Lesson:

We are about to hear a conversation between Jesus and a man whose name we don't know. We do know that he is young and has a lot of stuff, so he must be rich. Yet, all this stuff doesn't seem to be doing it for him, so he asks, "What do I lack?" Jesus prefaces his answer by saying, "If you wish to be perfect," then do X, Y and Z. It's easy for us to misunderstand what Jesus meant by that word "perfect." Jesus was not saying to him, if you wish to be perfect, that is if you wish to live error-free, never making a mistake. No. In the Greek this word means being whole, undivided. So Jesus is actually saying, "If you wish to be whole, if you wish to love God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind, to live an undivided, un-fractured, life then here's exactly what YOU need to do.

Sermon

"Hi Pastor Laurie. Why are you leaving?" This was a text message I received from one of our newer members last week. I appreciated the candor of this question. Since I first broke the news of my departure, no one had asked me the question quite this directly. Why am I leaving Westminster? It's a great question and one that I will attempt to answer in my sermon today, while seeking to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to all whom God has drawn here today—even if you are a first time visitor this morning wondering to yourself, "why did I choose to come here on the last Sunday of an Associate Pastor I've never met?" It has to do with that tricky business of discernment.

So why *would* I ever leave such a great call at such an amazing church, with such a loving, generous, lively, committed congregation and such a richly talented, wonderfully collegial, staff? Not to mention leaving the automatic icemaker ever at the ready with a prodigious amount of ice, or the delectable tastes and textures of the signature Westminster salad, or the colorful medley of roasted root vegetables at the Harvest Dinner... OK: there is also the great preaching and heavenly music that have nourished my soul and taught me so much. Westminster, I love you deeply and am profoundly grateful for all you have given me over the last ten years. How could I ever leave you?

My decade here has literally flown by with wonderful worship constants: Christmas in the Cathedral, Heritage Sunday, Labyrinth Walks, Maundy Thursday Communion and Tenebrae, Seven Last Words on Good Friday, climaxing on Easter Sunday with the Oakwood Brass and Brent's Cymbal crash proclaiming the victory: Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Hallelujah! Along with the constants, I have been thrilled by the new, innovative ministries, missions, and spiritual practices bearing witness to Christ in our Dayton Community and beyond: ID Ministry, WISE partnerships, Done in a Day, WINGS for the women at the YWCA, Cookie Walk, Prayer Wall, Taize Worship, Lenten Small Groups, Arts on Purpose, Blessing of the Animals, MADD Camp, Chicks with Sticks, becoming a certified Earth Care Congregation: these are just a few of the *new* things the Lord has begun since I cam in January of 2008.

The Genesis of my call here was conceived within the context of a strategic planning process back in the early 2000's, through which the session discerned Westminster's need to grow in the areas of spirituality and evangelism. And so you decided to create a new and unique position in our Presbyterian denomination—an Associate Pastor for Spiritual Growth—an aspect of pastoral ministry central to my heart and soul and mind. The Associate Pastor PNC, chaired by Gloria Pugh was marvelous: articulate, passionate, deep, ready to laugh and not take themselves too seriously. It seemed like a match made in heaven. What a great call to a surprisingly functional church, blessed with this beautiful gothic cathedral sanctuary and majestic organ. OK - I guess I'm talking myself out of leaving. Better cancel the farewell reception.... Just kidding.

Why *would* I ever leave this wonderful place? As surely as God called me here in 2007, God is clearly calling me now, to a new challenge. Through a mystical process of listening, conversation, asking, seeking, knocking, I have heard Christ's Summons. It goes something like this, "You have done what you were called to do here and it is time to begin a new call in a new state: as Head of Staff pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Marshfield, Wisconsin. Use all that you have been learned in your ten years at Westminster and your doctoral work at Columbia and get going!"

If you were surprised when you first heard the news—so was I. If you wondered what God was thinking, so did I. If you don't understand completely why this is happening, neither do I. I am happy and comfortable and delighted with what is going on here at Westminster. Staying would be easier. Preaching every Sunday is a uniquely challenging and relentless task—ask Richard. Moderating session, deacons, doing all the pastoral care, learning the names, getting to know the lives of 300 new people in a new town in a new state? Staying here would be easier. Staying here, at this stage of my life, is likely what you expected. But you may have noticed: comfortable, easy, expected, understandable these are *not* typically the touchstones of the faithful who populate the Old and New Testaments. And it certainly wasn't the path of Christ during his days on this earth, either. So where do we get the idea that following Christ is about easy and comfortable?

And if it's *not* about comfort, control, complete understanding, control and predictability, what is it about? If we make the turn and choose to follow Christ, what are we really signing up for? If we think being a Christian, is mainly about being nice, going to church, and staying out of trouble, living a life of ease and minimal pain: I don't think we're really paying attention to the God who chose to become flesh and move into the neighborhood—the God who chose to experience first hand pain, shame, and abandonment to the point of dying on the cross to save us and the world. Yes, it's this Jesus, whom God raised from the dead, this is the Jesus who summons us with two words, "follow me."

Let's look at how this call works in our Jeremiah and Matthew texts. Call it Discernment 101. We heard two call stories: first Nancy read the call of the boy prophet Jeremiah, and in our second lesson, I read the call of the wealthy Young Man by Christ from Matthew. One said "yes" and one walked away, presumably saying, "no" with his feet and his heart. Jeremiah, the one who said, "yes," was called to travel an extremely rough road of suffering. No matter how hard he tried to get God's message out, they weren't buying it. Jeremiah laments in chapter 20: "I have become a laughing-stock all day long; everyone mocks me (Jer. 20:7) it got so bad at one point that he wrote: "Curse be the day on which I was born." Jeremiah's call was that hard.

The "Young Man" in Matthew (this story is found also in Mark and Luke with slight variations) seems to have it together "*I have kept all these; what do I still lack?*"—he definitely sounds like a law-abiding citizen who is nice, goes to church, stays out of trouble. Yet at that instant, he gives Jesus an opening, acknowledging some vague unknown void. However when he hears what Christ commands of him. Yikes! "Are you crazy? Sell all my stuff? Give it to the poor?" This was not what he was expecting at all. Nor, I'm guessing did it make any sense to him. It must have sounded too hard. Too shape shifting. Too much sacrifice. Too something. We can only guess. What we know is his answer, he made it with his feet, "he went away, grieving,"

Both of these calls involve significant giving and sacrifice of one kind or another: that's how God's call reshapes the world and us. What that sacrifice actually is, and what that stretch may entail, is different for every person and for every faith community. For this man, it was his possessions; for someone else, it could something completely different. But it is *precisely the friction between who we are and whom God still wants us to become*, painful as that can be, that grows us spiritually. It is that turn from my way to God's way—that *rebirths* us again and again.

These two stories also teach us that it's *not* just about our own individual walk with God. Following Christ, making this turn is the key, the crux, and the fulcrum on which God's reshaping of this world depends. Did you notice how both the call of Jeremiah, and the call of the Rich Young Man are a call to engagement with their community? Jeremiah to lead his people, the people of Judah, back to the ways of righteousness and justice; the Young Man, to use his overabundance of material goods to redress the economic disparity in his community. No: It's not just about being nice; nor is it just about God and me. It's about sacrifice and a call to engagement with the community.

Nor do we ever understand completely what we are getting into. Do you think teenage Mary had any clue what she

was getting into when she said “yes” to being the mother of Jesus? Or do you think Peter and Andrew had a glimmer of understanding what Jesus meant when he approached them at their boat, calloused hands, wet and fishy, saying, “Come, follow me.”

If we don’t get “comfortable, predictable, understandable” and instead we get the call to sacrifice and engagement with our community, why would anyone say “yes”? God gives us that choice. We are always free to reject God’s call, like the rich young man. Why would we? Why am I leaving Westminster now? What does God offer them, you, and me? Two things: Divine presence and Eternal purpose. You heard it in our Jeremiah text, “Do not be afraid of them, *for I am with you* to deliver you, says, the Lord.” (v.8) And in Matthews: Jesus promised a life of wholeness. Yes: in seeking above all to follow Christ, we are promised these two things: **divine presence**, “*I am With You*” and **eternal purpose**, “*Follow me*.” When we get in step with God’s call, our steps, no matter how small, or seemingly insignificant become Christ made flesh here and now: healing our wounded souls and reshaping the world toward justice and peace.

In J. Philip Newell’s book, *Rebirthing God: Christianity’s Struggle for New Beginnings*, he writes, “that Mahatma Ghandi (1869-1948) who was, of course not a Christian but a Hindu, had in his room at the Sabarmati Ashram a picture of Jesus with an inscription below that read, ‘He is our Peace.’ Ghandi called Jesus the great ‘Asian prophet’ a reminder to the West that our Savior Christ Jesus, when he walked this earth was not a Westerner at all. As Ghandi use to say, if Christians had actually done what Jesus taught us to do—namely, love our enemy—the world would long ago have been transformed. Christianity became disfigured when it went to the West,’ said Ghandi. ‘It became the religion of kings.’ Ghandi challenged us to turn our creed back into deed, our belief in Jesus into following the practice of Jesus.” I hear in Ghandi’s words the core of what our scripture texts teach us: answering the call of God, the call of Christ, “Follow me” requires not only our words, but also our hands, and feet; our eyes and our hearts.

The stories of Jeremiah and the Rich Young Man’s calls, and the story of my new call away from Westminster reveal a pattern. This pattern can help us discern whether something is God’s will or not. This can be something as small as a conversation you are wondering how or whether to have; or something as large as a career move. If the thing you are considering requires that you give in a way that may seem hard or awkward, but calls out the best in you; if this thing calls to the center of who you are and who you understand God created you to be; if you are surprised by the calm, the peace you feel, even in the midst of not completely understanding the what or the why: those are signs that this thing is what God is calling you to do. If people who love you and know you, confirm and encourage you when you tell them about this thing, that is another strong sign. If this thing grows compassion in your heart and in the world; if it moves this world even one inch toward justice and peace, especially for the least, the lost, and the lonely, or others on the margins: that thing, that voice is God calling, calling you. Calling us.

God will speak through the process along the way, as you are trying to discern which way to go, little signs will pop up when your least expect them. One of my surprises along the way to my call from Wisconsin was the application and interview experience. Who likes to write applications? Especially ones requiring a series of essays and a Statement of Faith. Ask any Ruling Elder who has done this for session. Not many would call the experience fun. I dreaded the idea of writing these essays and cover letters, but God surprised me by the energy I had for this work. It was a challenge, but one that engaged and ignited the very deepest part of my spirit. God was definitely up to something.

A little sign on the other end of the process for me, once First Presbyterian Marshfield had called me and my heart was opened to this new congregation and new town, had to do with football. Yes, football, a sport I’ve never particularly cared for or ever followed. This has been a lack in my husband’s life, since neither I, nor our two daughters, would ever watch games with him on the TV. He used to try to pay the girls when they were little, he’d offer them a dollar if they would watch the game with him for half an hour. No deal. Yet in early conversations with the church in Marshfield I learned of their deep affection for the Green Bay Packers. And mysteriously, I’ve discovered myself relishing the Packers’ early season wins, and now praying about Aaron Rodgers’ right collarbone injury... Yes, God moves in mysterious ways.

God can even speak at the starting gun of a half marathon—certainly a time when I least expected it. On Saturday, October 7th in Indianapolis just at day break, as I was taking my place in corral C at the Indy Half Marathon at Fort Ben, thinking about how it was my third and final time to run this race, grateful for the clear fall day, and to be in the

right place at the right time, with bib and chip in place (a little bit like making it to your gate at the airport in time) when I glimpsed about fifteen feet in front of me, within the press of anxious runners ready to move at the sound of the gun, a slogan on the back of a Navy Blue T-Shirt, worn by a male runner with short grey hair. The words caught my attention. I read: "Remember the Unicorn." Now that's unusual, I thought to myself. Keep in mind, I did not have my glasses on. But I could see the smaller print below looked to be a Bible verse. So my first thought was, there aren't any unicorns in the Bible. So I looked again with increasing curiosity and was able to make out that the bible reference was "Jeremiah 1:5." That's when it dawned on me. It actually said, "Remember the Unborn."

This verse, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you," has come to serve as a proof text for some who oppose abortion. And likely this was the message his shirt intended. However, as it turned out, I ended up running about twenty feet behind that shirt for a full one and a half hours, (this runner's pace and mine turned out to be quite similar) giving me plenty of time to think about the unicorn, the unborn, and original meaning of Jeremiah 1:5 within its context during the reign of King Josiah and on into the Fall of Jerusalem.

I began to realize that the call of the prophet Jeremiah has more to do with the way God calls each of us into a unique and particular path of work and relationships, than providing the answer to the biological question and mystery of when a human life begins. If you listen to the poetry, it suggests that somehow God's intention and plan for us begins even *before* conception – "*before* I formed you in the womb." I believe that God births each of us (each person and each church body) with a specific purpose and calling that only we can fulfill. And this call certainly evolves and morphs over time. The wonderful assurance I glean from this text, is that God also prepares us with the necessary wherewithal to follow this call, whether we *feel like we can or not*. Did you hear Jeremiah's objection, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how...for I am only a boy." (v.6) I believe this sense of the call being too hard or too beyond us, is another sign that it is from God. And not only that: If we do not do it, that work for God's realm will not happen as God intended.

God is calling us, my friends. God is calling the Christian church, here on the eve of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, to be reborn, rebirthed into embodying Christ's love for all creatures and all creation that we desperately need in these next 500 years. Here's where the unicorn comes in: God is calling us to listen to the young adults of our generation and give them a seat at the table. We sometimes refer to young adults in the main-line churches as "Unicorns" because we know they exist but we rarely see them. God is calling us to listen to them, to work with them to fulfill God's rebirthing of Christianity. Yes: "Remember the Unicorn."

Applying the message of Jeremiah 1:5 to question as to why I am leaving is this: I am confident that God has called me to Marshfield, not only because that is where I and Marshfield need me to be, but also because God has prepared someone else since *before they were born* to come to Westminster, with their unique set of gifts, talents, skills, experiences and personality to do the work that needs to be done here in 2018 or 2019 and beyond. Work that only *that* person can do—to a position description yet to be revealed. In our shared sadness at my leaving, I pray this truth helps.

Finally, I have so much to thank you for. All of you and each of you. Thank you for taking a chance with me and with this new position. For jumping on board with "Unbinding the Heart" small groups, for trusting me, trusting us enough to try new spiritual practices that pushed you outside your comfort zone. For all the things we have tried, all the new member classes we have led together, the Christmas plays, the Lenten Small Groups, building the Prayer Wall, our interfaith collaboration, outreach to our neighbors with WINGS at the YWCA; the chance to learn so much through my Doctor of Ministry Training, and recently: your eagerness to read my final project about the Unicorns. Know that all I have done has depended on excellent work done before me, and the people and situations in my life, my family, my friends, and you who have pushed me to grow and struggle and learn. Nothing I have done or any of us does, is completely original. Nor does it depend on any one person. The beauty, the power, the mystery is in our interconnectedness, the teaching and learning and growing that God gives us all through one another.

Let us close my sermon with a prayer – a breath prayer, which is also my sermon title. Take a look at the bulletin, you will see it printed: "***I am with you***" breathe in. Then breathe out on the second part of the phrase after the comma, "***Follow me.***" So nobody hyperventilates or passes out (not the best note to end a sermon on), let's do this silently, together. Let us pray, "***I am with you, follow me...***" Amen.