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**Whitestone Presbyterian Church**

**Ephesians 3:7-13**

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopalian preacher and teacher, writes this: “there seems to be a real shortage of joy these days. I don’t see a lot of people twirling around in church or anywhere else, for that matter, and I think I know why. It’s too revealing, for one thing. And it can be too embarrassing to watch. I remember walking past a big downtown water fountain with a grown-up friend of mine a number of years ago. We were right in the middle of the Plaza at Georgia State University, with students sitting all over the place. It was one of the first days of spring. The sun was shining. Pigeons were flapping in the sky overhead. We were talking about something very adult when all of a sudden my friend just snapped. He ran over to the water fountain, plunged his hands into it and drenched himself. Then he ran back to me, squealing like a five-year-old, and put his cold, wet hands on either side of my face.

I was appalled, absolutely appalled. Everyone was staring. And I’ll tell you the worst part. The worst part was that I wanted to throw a scarf over his head, because his face was so completely open, so utterly defenseless, that I could hardly stand to look at it. I didn’t say it, but I thought it: “For heaven’s sake, man, get hold of yourself! You’ve got to learn to protect yourself better than that. Think what could happen to you if you walked around letting everyone see who you are like that. You could get hurt! You could scare someone!” Now, all these years later, I wish I could find him and tell him that he was right and I was wrong.

I think of Barbara’s friend, about how something inside of him called him to life in that moment, God called him to life in its fullest, life ordained, claimed by God that led him into celebrating the incredible moments of the first day of spring, or the birth of our Savior on an Eve in December, or the possibility that comes with beginning a new year. I think of how scary it is once we have all lived a little, once we have had enough years under our belts to feel resentment and regrets, disillusionment and fear of anything changing to be so open to God’s movements within and among us, to really live into the lives that Christ calls us to.

I wonder for you when it was when you have been called to the very life that you have been given. I wonder if yet you have experienced the time, or the many times when God has gotten a hold of you, taken you by your shirt collar and pushed you forward into this very one life that you have been given, this gift of God’s grace. When was it, or has it ever been that you have been claimed by the gospel, that you know you have had to go forward, a servant of God, living into the great unknown of the mystery hidden only for God to know and us to find out.

One moment for me was in high school—confirmation class. We went to the Presbyterian Conference Center in Montreat, NC for a youth conference. We were stuck camping, since our pastor had made the reservations late and there were no houses left to sleep in. One day I went hiking with a few others, we found a stream. The water was freezing cold. It was fresh and so clean it felt drinkable. I lie in the stream, face up, the bitter cold water moving through my hair and soaking my clothing. We had not been bathing regularly, as we were camping and all, and so the clean, clean water was amazing against my grimy skin. The clean, cool water soothed every part of my soul and my spirit and my brain, every part that felt completely unacceptable and foreign, confused and convoluted, outside of the realm of whom God could have ever made a human to be. And I looked up and saw the sun break through the branches and the leaves and kiss me on my face. God kissed me that day, sending me forth, to live into the mystery of things.

Later that day, or that week, during worship, I heard a sermon, preached by a woman. It was one of the first and few sermons I had heard any woman preach before. And she told us that in no uncertain terms it is to this life we are called, this one and precious life that we have been given by God, to live into its fullness and its mystery. Nothing we were or could do would separate us, these fragile teenagers from the love of God, or for the plans that Christ had laid out at our baptisms. And then, we joined together, we joined our hands in small circles and we fed each other the juice and the bread. We ate the body that was as broken as ours, we drank the wine as spilled as we felt. And we knew, for that one moment, that in our brokenness, in our confusion and our questions, in our changing bodies and new identities, that our life was precious and important, necessary and a mystery.

This was one moment. There are many others. It seems since we can be such stubborn human beings that we need many of these moments, reminders, that we are claimed and known and perfectly imperfect, just as we are.

The writer of Ephesians tells us his story: “of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power.” And like us, he knows so well how imperfectly perfect he is: “Although I am the very least of the saints, this grace was given to me to bring ...the news of the boundless riches of Christ...to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things” He is called, he has been called, God’s claim has come over his life in no uncertain terms.

Just as God’s claim has come on your life and my life too—in no uncertain terms.

When people ask me when I knew I was called to the ministry, after the first few times fumbling through some nonsensical answer, I knew I had to come up with something short and real and true. And so now my answer, which is true, is that there was never a time when I was not called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. There is an assumption that somehow I chose ministry, for being a pastor but, really, truth be told, it chose me. Most days it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. The writer of Ephesians says it this way: “of this gospel I have become a servant.” From the time I was a child I knew

that I was called to lead God's people in this way, knowing myself that despite myself and because of myself God was calling me to help others know that God had a claim, a calling on their lives as well, expressed in baptism and lived out each time we gather to share with each other.

And so, I knew these things, deep in my bones, long before I was able to admit to myself or anyone else that God had created my longing for relationship, for an intimate partner, to be with another woman. When I was able to realize this and admit it and know as deeply as I knew that I was called to ministry, I found myself living deeper into God's mystery, the mystery that the writer of Ephesians talks about in this passage. The more I fought it the less peace I felt with God, the more I accepted myself the more known I was by God.

And this story, this little brief snippet of my story, I have learned, is not that different from many other people's stories of those whom are gay and lesbian. Others have actually had much more dramatic and painful stories. Some of you may have similar stories here today. I could tell you stories of suicide attempts, because of the messages the church has given to those of us who are not heterosexual. I could tell you stories of children kicked out of their homes by parents who use the Bible to justify their actions. I could tell you stories of individuals who went to ministries who promised to change their sexual orientation, only to come out even more convinced that they were gay or lesbian, and feeling even worse about that. I could tell you stories of individuals just as convinced as I am that they are called to share with others in ministry and have pushed against the boundaries and the rules of the church relentlessly with that confidence—because the passion of Christ refuses to let us be silent, refuses to let our gifts go unnoticed and unfulfilled. I could tell you stories of grieving with individuals who have had to leave the Presbyterian Church to go to other denominations who will recognize their callings, not as gay and lesbian people, but as Christians who happen to be gay or lesbian. I could tell you stories of being overjoyed with individuals who have been given the opportunity to serve and thrive and help others do the same. I could tell you stories of congregations who studied human sexuality, afraid at first, but knowing they had to do it, coming out the other end sure of what they believe, sure of who God was calling them to be, afraid still that they may lose members if they declare that God calls us all to Christian discipleship, all of us, those who are gay and lesbian and those who are not, and instead of losing members they gain members, instead of losing their identity they live a bit more fully into their Christian identity.

When was it for you that you knew, that you know, that God has claimed you for ministry? When was it for you, as individuals, yes, but as a congregation too, that you know God has claimed you for ministry? It isn't a question for only those of us who are ordained, as Ministers of Word and Sacrament, like Andy and I are, or as Elders, or as Deacons, but really for us all. The day we were baptized we were chosen for the ministry, the day we were baptized we acknowledged and celebrated God's choosing of us, the day we were baptized we were set apart for service to Christ, to be led by the Holy Spirit.

I heard preacher Tom Long once tell this story: When he lived in Princeton, NJ he worshipped in the Presbyterian Church on the university campus, it was a church filled with academics and seminary professors, it was a church that prides itself on its high intellectual caliber. One Wednesday night he was at a family night supper and he sat next to a man he didn't know and they struck up a conversation and the man asked him "how long have you been a part of the church?" Tom said, oh not long, we just moved to Princeton, but we really like the church. And then he asked the man: "how long have you been a part of the church? And he said: oh my lord, I've been a member of this church all my life, in fact I am the last non-intellectual left in this congregation. Tom said, "you're kidding." And he said "no, I'm not, I haven't understood a sermon that's been preached here in 25 years."

But then he said, "you know I'd never leave this congregation though." Tom asked why. He told him that every Monday night he and a few others in the congregation took the church van up the road to Sommerville, NJ to the youth correctional institute. He said, sometimes we have bible study and sometimes we just play ping pong with the guys and get to know them. He said, you know, I started doing it cause it's the kind of thing I thought a Christian was supposed to do. But now, I wouldn't miss a Monday night because I have found that Jesus Christ is already there waiting on us and it nourishes my soul. And then he said this: I have found that you cannot prove in advance any of the promises of God. But if you put one foot in front of the other and live them, they are true, every one. This is a man who understands, I think, what he is called for.

When have you known what you are called for? When has God taken you by your shirt collar or gently pushed you along to live into the mystery Christ calls us into?