

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jan Lamb on Sunday, January 17, 2010.

2nd Sunday of Epiphany, 2010

Isaiah 62:1-5, I Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11

A couple of weeks ago, I was engaged in a conversation with several people who were discussing how they would react if they won the lottery – the really big lottery, not the \$2 scratch off – but the Powerball, the multi-million dollar lottery. Of course there was talk about quitting jobs, taking trips, buying houses, but some in the group also shared stories they had read of people who were burdened by their winnings. Winners always report that their lives changed. We talked about folks who never stepped forward to claim this windfall, and others who gave away most of their winnings to help friends, relatives, or charities.

When I read Paul's words to the young church at Corinth, I think of each of God's children as a winner. God has given every person gifts. "Who me?" you say. We often think of these gifts in the spectacular – the musician whose playing or singing brings tears to our eyes, the artist who can turn a canvas into a life-like scene, the writer who crafts amazing stories that transport us into unknown lands, the architect who designs a sky-scraper, the athlete who seems to glide across the field or floor with ease and power – it sometimes seems like we everyday folk have missed out. But according to Paul, there are varieties of gifts. Everyone has been given gifts; everyone has a ministry, a call from God to follow.

You have often heard from this pulpit, Frederick Buechner's words on what God's calls is. He says, "The place God calls us to is the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Paraphrasing Micah 6:8, South African United Methodist Bishop George Irvine has said, "If it's loving, if it's just, if it promotes right relationships, and if it scares the heck out of you, it just might be a call from God."

Mary Redding writes in her book, *While We Wait*, "Some people seem to think that answering God's call means turning their back on what they truly enjoy, but I believe God puts our passions within us to energize us and lead us toward what we are meant to do with our lives" She continues, "I have come to believe that the deep desires of our heart, the ones deep within us that stay year after year and do not go away, are put there by God. Our passions and desires are part of who God made us to be, and paying attention to them can help us discover and define our mission."

I want to tell you a story – it's a story of a passion. It's a story of risk. It's a story of a call.

When I was a little girl and a teenager, I wanted to be a missionary. I wanted to go to some far-away place and teach poor little children who lived in grass huts how to read and write and about the love of Jesus. I would spin my globe and search the names of countries in Africa, Asia and the South Pacific. Sadly in the 1960s in my church in Mississippi, there weren't any good role models for this life. All the women I could read about, occasionally even meet, were the *wives* of missionaries who wore drab clothes and sensible shoes. After awhile that dream got pushed to the back. I got married, raised children, became a teacher; life happened. Fast forward, if you will, to early 2002. St. Luke's is sending its first mission team to Belize. A spot in the group has opened up and I've decided to take it. I'm not sure how my principal will react to my being away from school for over a week, and I'm not really sure how I'll scrape up the money for the trip, but something tells me I need to make it happen. And so off I go, not really knowing what to expect. I don't even know many of the other group members all that well. That week, I worked harder physically, than I have ever worked. None of the skills I used every day here at home were at all useful. I was in totally new territory. And it changed my life.

I couldn't wait for the next year, to go back again. And every year, I said – and many of you heard me say it -- "I'm going back. I'm going back when I can stay longer than a week, where I can be a part of the community, as I can try to make a little bit of a difference." So I went 7 more times with the St. Luke's teams, searching each town or village to see if that were the place for me. And then the last night of our 2006 trip, I sat next to Francis Wilson at dinner and listened to her vision for a school on the island of Ambergris Caye, a school that would provide a free education to some of the poorest children in Belize, in a community where many children had never been to school. And, she told us, there were plans to include a special education class. As someone who has taught children with special needs for 3 decades, I was hooked.

We returned to Belize in February of 2007, and this time spent our week at the newly opened Holy Cross Anglican School. You have heard and read the stories of the beginning of the school, how it was built on free land given by the government, 8 acres of swamp land and garbage dump, how there were no desks or books or pencils those first few months, yet children came every day from all over the island, to sit on the floor and learn. You've heard the stories of the classrooms we helped build, the cafeteria and chapel and the computer lab that St. Luke's

hands and backs help bring to life. You've given the mission teams books and school supplies and shoes and money to help the school grow. You've heard stories about the beautiful children we came to love as we read and spelled and did math problems together. This is where my deep gladness has met a deep hunger. God has spoken to me through those children who are so proud of their school, and who love books and love to learn, who love to share hugs and smiles and tell you what they have learned. God has called me through the teachers who can't get enough of what I can share from my years of teaching and working as a teacher of teachers. God has called me to Holy Cross and so, next Monday, I will leave home and school, family and you, to go to San Pedro, Belize, as a long-term volunteer at Holy Cross School. I will be there through the end of their school year in late June. You may have noticed that I'm just a bit excited.

Some of you are probably thinking, why does she have to go all the way to Belize? We certainly have lots of poor children and at-risk schools right here in Durham. Yes we do. But I believe I have to leave my comfortable surroundings, my safe life and immerse myself in something unfamiliar in order to come back here and better address those needs. I have to step into a different world in order to better appreciate my world.

Our Gospel lesson today, the familiar story where Jesus changes water into wine at the wedding in Cana, is a story of risk --- Jesus performs a miracle at a wedding, right there in front of people; his first miracle. He uses a gift God gave him alone. I don't think it's a coincidence that this Gospel reading about risk and daring is paired with an epistle that talks about the gifts of the Spirit, because it can be scary to claim your gifts and answer God's call. It's much easier to sit back and let other people -- people who are smarter or more devout or better educated -- take the lead.

Jesus said he came not to be served but to serve. If following Jesus means doing what he did, then we each are called to serve. We live in a world that needs serving. Jesus takes us, whoever we are and uses us, fulfills us, lets us sing our song, follow our passion, claim our gifts. This church offers so many opportunities for service. Next week, we will commission our new Vestry members and say thank you to those who are finishing their terms. These Vestry members use their gifts and training for the sake of God's work in this parish. Thanks be to God for people who know how to read financial statements, to monitor thermostats and make our facilities 'green', to work on site plans and reconfiguring driveways, to meet and welcome newcomers. The gifts don't just belong to the Vestry either. The call to teach our children through Godly Play, to take our teenagers to Belize and on ski trips, to provide meals and transportation for the homeless, to visit the sick, to sing with the choir, to teach English to newcomers to our community, to greet and hug a friend on Sunday morning and give them a call later in the week just to check in --- "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" All of these gifts are the manifestations of God's grace to us. If these gifts are gifts of grace to us, then their use should also be manifestations of gifts of God's grace to others. We have not been given these gifts simply to bring pleasure or honor or glory to ourselves. We have them in order to demonstrate God's grace to others, and in that way we bring glory and honor to the name of Jesus Christ.

There are some things you should know as you claim your gifts, hear God's call and answer it: first, you won't stay the same. That transformation, that change, is what discipleship is about. Second, once we start this journey, there may be no limit to the impact on our lives. It will shape the way we parent, the way we work, the way we treat each other and the way we view our community. And finally, it won't always be easy. It will be hard, but it will be worth it, because along with the cost, there is the promise that no one and no situation is beyond the reach of God. The good news is that God's call comes to each of us, and God walks with us as we answer it. God can use each of us. I see endless possibilities for this parish. I will truly miss you while I'm gone. But I know I don't go alone. I take you with me in my heart and when I return, we will share hugs and stories, not only of what I did as I answered God's call to go to Belize, but what you did to answer God's call while I was away. AMEN.