

Sermon for August 26, 2007: Calling and Deliverance

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Hebrews 12: 18-29

Luke 13: 10-17

Anyone who cares about baseball at all, even those who, like myself, are not Yankee fans, were saddened last week at the news that Fiero Francis Rizzuto died late in the day on Monday, August 13. Known as Phil, or more commonly as Scooter, Rizzuto made his major league debut with the Yankees on April 23, 1941. Except for a three year stint in the US Navy during WWII, and a short lapse between the end of his playing days with the Yankees and his signing by them as a broadcaster in 1957 (which he would do until 1996), he was associated with the Yankees for over five decades. Phil Rizzuto was clearly called to play baseball, but when he was young, that call didn't seem so clear to others. He grew up in Brooklyn and then Long Island, and played for Richmond Hills High. He was small – only 5'6" and 150 as a pro – but he was quick and strong and tough. Nevertheless, when he tried out with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Casey Stengel, the manager at the time, told him to "Go home and get a shoeshine box – you're too short to play baseball." He also tried out with the New York Giants, who also turned him down, before he was picked up by the Yankees. He could have doubted his call to play baseball – but he stuck with it. He responded, he didn't give up, and even when the Yankees cut him, in 1956, in a very sad and ugly way, he maintained his class, and held his peace. He was called; he responded; and he had a baseball career that most people, even other players, only dream about.

Calls can be scary things. Rizzuto embraced his call to baseball at an early age, after also playing football in high school. Jeremiah, however, was reluctant to accept his call as a prophet of the Lord, at least at first. Jeremiah was from a long line of respected Levites, whose ancestor had been sent out of Jerusalem by Solomon for supporting one of his half-brothers as David's successor to the rule of the kingdom of Israel. Perhaps Jeremiah had grown up with some sort of understanding that he would be a priest, fulfilling priestly functions. There are some commentators who believe that his father, Hilkiah, is the same Hilkiah who discovered the Book of the Law during work done on the Temple that began Josiah's reforms. When God called Jeremiah to be not only a priest, but His prophet, he was a young man – maybe about the same age that Rizzuto was when he first started playing for the Yankees. Jeremiah was concerned about being too wet behind the ears for the task of being God's prophet to the nations. But God reminded Jeremiah that He would be with him – God empowers all whom God calls. God's presence is always with those whom God calls. And so Jeremiah immediately begins his faithful response to God's call to him, as he prophesies about nations and kingdoms, about who will be pulled down and who will be plucked up, about who will be destroyed and overthrown, and about who will be built up and planted anew. We know what happened during the 40+ years of Jeremiah's prophetic service to the Lord. Deliverance, at least deliverance as the Hebrews saw it, didn't happen – instead the people were hauled off to Babylon, and Jeremiah himself, along with his faithful friend and secretary, Baruch, were hauled off to Egypt. But the people were delivered – from their limited understand of who God is. They learned, through their exile, that they had been keeping God in a box – a box called the Temple of Solomon. They discovered that the God of Israel really was the God of the nations – all of the nations – and that they too could be assured of God's presence at all times and all places, even by the shores of the River in Babylon, where their captors commanded them to sing songs about Israel for their entertainment. See Psalm 138 for the details on that.

Sometimes calls lead directly to deliverance. Jesus was preaching, one particular Sabbath day, in a synagogue. And suddenly He realized that there was a woman present who had been afflicted with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. Eighteen years is a long time to be bent

over and so hurting that you can't stand up straight. Jesus called her over. What would it feel like to be singled out in the middle of the service, out of the clear blue sky? What would it feel like to have the service come to a screeching halt, and be asked to come forward? How self-conscious would that make us? And if we'd been afflicted for 18 years, chances are that our bodies wouldn't have been moving too quickly. Can you imagine what it may have been like for that woman – remember the status of women in Israel at that time was not much more than that of a slave – as bent and hurting as she was, to have been called to come over, right in the middle of the service? The eyes of everyone in the congregation would have been focused on her – she was probably self-conscious enough of her differences, and her status, before getting singled out like that. She had a choice – she could have allowed her self-consciousness to hold her back, or she could come forward anyway. Well, she chose to respond to that call, as uncomfortable as she may well have been. And Jesus laid His hands on her, and freed her from her ailment – and immediately she stood up – and this time she wasn't at all worried about self-consciousness – she immediately began to praise God.

Not everyone praised God, however – the synagogue leader, who didn't have the courage to criticize Jesus directly, even though He was standing right there, complained to the crowd that work, even the work of deliverance, the work of healing, should NOT happen on the Sabbath. The Lord of the Sabbath responded that it makes sense to show at least as much compassion for humans as we would show to animals. If animals are delivered from hunger and thirst even on the Sabbath, why wouldn't we deliver daughters of Abraham from spirits that cripple them on the Sabbath?

Not everyone is going to be pleased when deliverance happens. That's ok. Our concern is not to worry about the reactions of others to our deliverance. Our concern is rather to respond to the calls that God issues to us, as individuals and as a called, gathered people of God. Jeremiah may have been surprised by his call from the Lord – clearly he wasn't expecting it. He doubted his ability TO respond appropriately. But the Lord WAS with him, and ultimately the people of Israel were delivered from their limited understanding of God, as they came to understand that their Creator was the Creator of all. The woman who was healed may have been surprised by her call from Jesus to come forward. She may have been overwhelmed with fear, with embarrassment, with self-consciousness – but she also responded – and she was delivered from her affliction. I wonder what calls are coming into our hearts as individuals and as a congregation, from the Lord. What are we being called to, as individuals, and as a congregation, that we may not anticipate, that might make us self-conscious, that might scare us, that might make us afraid? And what are we going to do with those feelings of inadequacy, of self-consciousness, of fear?

The letter to the Hebrews warns us to not refuse the One who is speaking. But I prefer to go with Paul's assurances that are found in Romans 8, starting at the 28th verse: **What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.**

We all have gifts. We are all called to use those gifts. May we have the courage to respond to those calls, for our own deliverance, and for the deliverance of those whom we are called to serve, trusting in the Lord God in all things, until Jesus returns in glory. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Then I said, “Ah, LORD God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” Then the LORD put out His hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put My words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

Hebrews 12: 18-29

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them. (For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.”) But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the One who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the One who warns from heaven! At that time His voice shook the earth; but now He has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.” This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe; for indeed our God is a consuming fire.

Luke 13: 10-17

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When He laid His hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”

When He said this, all His opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that He was doing.