

Sermon for January 7, 2007 – I Have Called You by Name

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Acts 8: 14-17

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Many of you remember, from high school English, these lines, from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a Capulet. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy; - Thou art thyself though, not a Montague. What's Montague? It is not hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man. O, be some other name! What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet; So Romeo would, were he not Romeo called, retain that dear perfection which he owes without that title: Romeo, doff thy name, and for that name, which is no part of thee, take all myself." Juliet is arguing with herself about the importance of names, since the Montagues and the Capulets are sworn enemies. But she argues with herself because she knows that names DO matter – when we call one another by name, it matters – we answer because we have been called by our names. Romeo answered in part because she was calling his name. Juliet's mother had suggested to Juliet that she become engaged to Paris, a nobleman of Verona – if Juliet, on her balcony, had said, "Paris, Paris, wherefore art thou Paris?" Romeo would have kept quiet, and gone home disappointed. It was because Juliet DID call his name that Romeo responded to her as she talked to herself on the balcony that night.

When someone calls us by name, it is because they want our attention; they want to communicate with us. Our names help to identify us. In a crowd, one of the ways to get someone's attention is to call that person by their name. Instinctively we turn toward someone who is calling our name. That's actually a trick that paparazzi use when they are trying to take a celebrity's picture. We almost instinctively respond to the sound of someone calling us by name.

Twice in this passage from Isaiah God tells the Israelites to fear not, because He, God, has called them by name. God knows who they are, as individuals and as a people. God tells them not to be afraid – God is with them, and God will gather them again as His children, from all of the ends of the earth. God knows who they are, and God is calling them by name, and by His name.

God also called Jesus by name; we know that Jesus was named before Mary was visited by Gabriel. As an infant and as a child, Jesus and His family were called by God, and they chose to respond. John the Baptizer chose to respond to God as well, as he grew up. John assumed the role God had laid out for him, a role proclaimed by Zechariah when he said that his son would go before the Messiah to make the rough roads straight, to prepare a way for the One who was to come. And in today's Epiphany reading, we have Jesus and John encountering one another at the Jordan, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry as an adult. His cousin has answered God's call; now Jesus answers God's call as well. The Holy Spirit descends onto Jesus, in the form of a dove, and God proclaims, "You are My Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased."

The amazing thing about being called by God by name is that we don't have to be descended from the race of the Chosen People to be called by name. We don't have to be the Word made Flesh to be called by name. God calls us by name because God loves us

– we too are the beloved. We too are called – the question is not, “does God call us by name?” but rather, “What will we DO when God calls us by name? The way we answer that question is perhaps the most important decision we will ever make in our lives; the way we answer that question will determine the course of our lives.

Kevin A. Miller, vice-president, Christianity Today International tells this story about a 19 year old woman, who was baptized on November 9, 2003, in the church he is a member of, by passing on the testimony she offered immediately after her baptism. Her name is omitted to protect her and her family, some of whom still live in Pakistan.

“I choose this day to love and serve Jesus Christ as the Lord, the Messiah, the rest of my life. I became a Christian 5 months ago. When I was 7 years old, I moved to Pakistan. I was injured, and I was in a coma. After 8 months, I came out of the coma. I was in a wheelchair, my eyes were open, but I couldn't move, and I couldn't talk to people at all. At this time in my life, I saw my 18-year-old brother die in front of me. Every Friday, I went to the mosque and slept there because I didn't have any hope from the doctors that I could walk again or talk. One night I was really upset. I went straight to the picture of Jesus [who is recognized as a prophet in Islam] and started talking to him: "Why did you keep me alive? Why didn't you just kill me? Why did you keep me alive so I could see my 18-year-old brother dying in front of me?" My head was on the floor, and I was crying.

Suddenly somebody squeezed my shoulder and said, "I kept you for something special." I looked back, and it was the same person who was in the picture. I fainted.

In the morning I woke up—my grandpa woke me—and he said, "You fell asleep all night on the floor." I looked at him and said, "He was here. He was right here." My grandpa said, "Who?" Then he said, "Oh my gosh, you're talking again." I said, "He was right here. Where is He now?" My grandpa said, "Who?" "This guy [pointing at the picture of Jesus]. He told me He kept me for something special."

"Sweetie, that's not true, because he died a long time ago. Remember, I told you that story." I said, "No, I saw what I saw," and I stood up. My grandpa had a hard time believing me, but there was a part of him that wondered because he saw me talking and walking again.

I kept that memory in my heart, just a vision, and no one believed me at all. Everyone kept laughing at me.

So that's why I chose to get baptized in the name of Jesus, but in my heart I am already baptized in the Holy Spirit.”

This young woman understood that she had been called by name, that God had called her to do something special. Maybe that something special was no more than to offer her testimony as a Muslim who has converted to Christianity. I do not know WHY God called her by name, nor what God called her to do – that is between her and God. But I do know this: all of us have been called, and all of us have a choice: to respond to that call, or not.

In a few moments we will be ordaining and installing our new consistory. These are people whom God has called by name to serve as leaders of this congregation. These are people who have chosen to respond to that call. Not everyone is called to serve as an elder or a deacon, and not all of them who are called choose to serve. But whether or not we are called to ordained ministry, I can tell you this: All of us are called on to serve the Living God, with joy and with humility. We are to use the gifts we have received in His

service to embody God's love of justice, humility, & loving-kindness and to care for those who are powerless. We are not the Incarnate Word; we are not the Word made flesh to dwell among humanity – but we are human beings who are made in the image of God, and who are called on to be God's hands and feet to do God's will on earth, as it is in heaven. So let us DO God's will, with joy and with gratitude. Let us respond to being called by name until His Son returns again in glory. Amen.

The ecclesiastical duties of elders and deacons are set forth in the *Book of Church Order (BCO)*, Chapter 1, Part I, Articles 1-6. These shall be made known to the congregation prior to election to office and these office holders shall acquaint themselves therewith.

The *BCO* (Chapter 1, Part I, Article 2, Section 15) directs that the names of elders and deacons-elect shall be published in the church on three successive Sundays preceding their installation in order that the board of elders may consider legitimate objections. Elders and deacons may be reelected, but shall not be reordained. When reelected the following order shall be used as an installation. After the sermon and the prayer for blessing on the Word, as part of the Response to God, the presiding minister shall begin:
PRESENTATION

Beloved in the Lord, we have come to ordain and install elders and deacons in Christ's holy church. Christ alone is the source of all Christian ministry, through the ages calling men and women to serve. By the Holy Spirit all who believe and are baptized receive a ministry to witness to Jesus as Savior and Lord, and to love and serve those with whom they live and work. We are ambassadors for Christ, who reconciles and makes whole. We are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world. Following Christ's resurrection and ascension, God has given the church apostles, prophets, and teachers, deeds of power, gifts of healing, forms of assistance and leadership. We stand within a tradition where God calls and empowers deacons, elders, and ministers of Word and sacrament.

The elder vice president of consistory invites the candidates forward, saying:

This congregation has elected the following people to the offices of deacon and elder:

NN/s (using full names),

to be ordained and installed to the Office of Deacon;

NN/s _____,

to be ordained and installed to the Office of Elder;

NN/s _____,

to be installed as deacon;

and *NN/s* _____,

to be installed as elder.

The candidates shall remain standing; the presiding minister continues:

Deacons and elders are called to serve as Christ served. We look to them to be people of spiritual commitment, exemplary life, compassionate spirit, and sound judgment.

Deacons are set apart for a ministry of mercy, service, and outreach. They gather gifts and offerings, care for them faithfully, and distribute them with wisdom and compassion to persons in need and for purposes that advance God's kingdom on earth. Deacons visit and comfort the distressed, provide for whatever necessities may arise, and assist the congregation at services of worship.

Elders are set apart for a ministry of watchful and responsible care for the welfare and order of the church. They have oversight of all members, including one another, the deacons, and the ministers, equipping everyone to live in harmony with God's Word. They ensure the Word of God is rightly proclaimed and taught, and the sacraments faithfully administered. Elders assist the minister/s with their good counsel, and serve all Christians with advice, consolation, and encouragement.

Elders and deacons, together with the minister/s, form the consistory to lead God's people in proclaiming good news to the poor, righteousness to the nations, and peace among all. The consistory provides for the welfare of the church, stewardship of property and finance, and the spiritual benefit and growth of all Christ's people. As the three offices of deacon, elder, and minister of Word and sacrament, are united in Christ, so also in the church one office is not separate from the others. The minister of Word and sacrament does not serve without the elder and neither without the deacon. Together they enable the whole mission of the church. Everything in the church will be done decently and in order when faithful persons are called to office, and responsibly fulfil their charge.

The presiding minister addresses the deacons- and elders-elect:

Brothers and sisters, before almighty God, and in the presence of this congregation, answer sincerely these questions:

Do you confess together with us and the church throughout the ages your faith in one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

Yes, truly, with all my heart.

The presiding minister shall invite the congregation to stand:

Let us all stand with these brothers and sisters, confessing our faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended to the dead. On the third day He rose again; He ascended into heaven, He is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

The congregation is seated; the candidates remain standing; the presiding minister addresses the candidates:

Do you believe in your heart that you are called by Christ's church, and therefore by God, to this office?

Yes, truly, with all my heart.

Do you believe the books of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God and the perfect doctrine of salvation, rejecting all contrary beliefs?

Yes, truly, with all my heart.

Will you be diligent in your study of Holy Scripture and in your use of the means of grace? Will you pray for God's people and lead them by your own example in faithful service and holy living?

I will, and I ask God to help me.

Will you accept the church's order and governance, submitting to ecclesiastical discipline should you become delinquent in either life or doctrine?

I will, and I ask God to help me.

Will you be loyal to the witness and work of the Reformed Church in America, using all your abilities to further its Christian mission here and throughout the world?

I will, and I ask God to help me.

The presiding minister shall address the candidates for the Office of Deacon:

As deacons, will you faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully manifest Christ's love and care, gather and distribute the offerings of God's people, visit and comfort the distressed, minister to the poor and needy, and strive to advance God's reign of justice and peace?

I will, and I ask God to help me.

The presiding minister shall address the candidates for the Office of Elder:

As elders, will you faithfully, diligently, and cheerfully study God's Word, oversee the household of faith, encourage spiritual growth, maintain loving discipline, and provide for the proclamation of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments?

I will, and I ask God to help me.

ORDINATION

Those who are to be ordained shall kneel [or stand] individually before the presiding minister for prayer with the laying on of hands. The great consistory may join in the laying on of hands during the prayer. When all have come forward and are in place, the presiding minister shall say:

Let us pray. God of grace, pour out your Holy Spirit, gentle as a dove, burning as fire, upon *N (using Christian name only)* and fill *her/him* with grace and power for this ministry of *deacon/elder* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

When all ordinands have received prayer with the laying on of hands, the presiding minister continues:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, the only head of the church, I declare that *NNs (using full names)*

are ordained to the Office of Deacon and *NNs* _____ are ordained to the Office of Elder.

INSTALLATION

Elders and deacons of the great consistory extend the right hand of fellowship to the new elders and deacons before returning to their places. All elders and deacons being installed face the congregation. The presiding minister addresses them:

Elders *N/s (using Christian names)*, and deacons *N/s* _____, be faithful in performing your duties, magnify the One who has called you to these high and holy offices, be zealous for the church of Christ, hospitable, prudent, upright, devout, and self-controlled. Love goodness, holding always to the mystery of the faith.

The presiding minister addresses the congregation:

Members of *N* _____ Church, please rise to affirm your covenant with the elders and deacons whom God has given us. Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, do you receive in the name of the Lord, these deacons and elders as duly elected and ordained servants of Christ?

We do.

Do you promise to respect them for the sake of the offices for which they have been chosen and ordained?

We do.

Do you promise to encourage and pray for them, to labor together in obedience to the gospel for the unity, purity, and peace of the church, the welfare of the whole world, and the honor of our Lord Jesus Christ?

We do.

Beloved people of God, receive these deacons and elders as Christ's own servants. Support them in love, that their work may bear fruit. In the name and by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, I declare that these *brothers and sisters* are duly installed deacons and elders in this church.

Thanks be to God.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Almighty and ever loving God, You taught us to pray for ourselves and for others, and to give thanks for all of life. May every grace of ministry rest on these elders and deacons, keep them strong and faithful, that Your church may prosper in peace. Grant them wisdom, courage, discretion, and benevolence, that they may fulfill their charge to the glory of Jesus Christ. Bestow Your grace on this people that they may support these deacons and elders with prayer, cooperation, and encouragement, to guard them from growing weary in doing what is right. Inspire Your whole church with Your Spirit of power, unity, and peace. Grant that all who trust You may live together in love. Lead all nations in the way of justice. Direct those who govern; may they be fair, maintain order, support those in need, and defend the oppressed, that the world may know true peace. Give grace to all who proclaim the gospel through Word and sacrament and deeds of mercy, that by teaching and example others may come to live for You. Comfort and deliver, O Lord, all who are in trouble...sorrow...poverty...sickness...grief... Heal them in body, mind, spirit, or circumstance, working in them, by Your grace, wonders beyond their dreams and hopes, through Jesus Christ our Savior. **Amen.**

Then the Lord's Prayer, etc.

Isaiah 43: 1-7

But now thus says the LORD, He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in My sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring My sons from far away and My daughters from the end of the earth— everyone who is called by My name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made."

Acts 8: 14-17

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but One who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His granary; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased."