

“A Call, a Debt, and a Promise”
Romans 8:12-17; Isaiah 6:1-8

I was excited when I learned that the scheduled lectionary reading for this Sunday was the passage from Isaiah 6:1-8, because I knew this would give me an opportunity to tie my sermon into one of my favorite topics. If you have heard me talk or preach, you will know that I am a big fan of our church’s windows. We have our older windows, focusing on Jesus on the left, and church history on the right, and now we have our new windows. In the left transept is the Genesis window, with the creation story and Noah. To the right of the lectern is the window on books of the Old Testament from Exodus to Kings. In the right transept is the window of Psalm 23, which is right over where our new organ pipes will be. Finally, to the left of the pulpit is the window of the prophetic books. It is put here on purpose with the kind of trepidation that Isaiah felt, an acknowledgement of our inadequacy as preachers, and the knowledge that it is only with the help of the Holy Spirit that we dare to preach about God’s word. The window starts at the top with the tongs and hot coal from the call of Isaiah, then goes through the books of the prophets in biblical order. Next comes Jeremiah with the heart and quill of Jeremiah 33, and the hope that God’s word will be written on our hearts. Following this are city walls representing Ezekiel, the fiery furnace of Daniel, the wedding rings of Hosea, the plumb line of Amos, and finally on the bottom, the great fish that swallowed Jonah.

Today, as we begin with the Isaiah passage, we will start with the image at the top of the window, and examine the idea of the call of God, and what it means for our lives. Secondly, we will look at the idea of debt we heard about in Romans 8 this morning, and finally, we will look at promises we have made in our congregation, and our obligation to them.

First of all, we begin with the call of Isaiah, depicted at the top of the window to the left of the pulpit. Before I begin, let me say (especially, since he has already left the sanctuary to lead Children’s Church) that Dave Carlson stole my sermon topic! I came back from vacation two weeks ago, and found that Dave had preached an excellent sermon on the idea of the call of God, his in reference to the call of the 13th disciple, Matthias, after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. As a result, I will not spend too much time reexamining this idea of call. I do want to make a few points. God calls us to be God’s people in the world, to help bring about God’s kingdom. Part of our task is to discern God’s call to us. Christianity is not a passive sport. We cannot just sit back and watch. Instead, we need to ask, “How am I to be involved in the work of God?” Like Isaiah, we often hesitate at the call of God. Isaiah feels inadequate to the task. In fact, he actually feels despair. “Woe is me!” he cries. But Isaiah manages to do God’s work because of God’s love and forgiveness. In the image we see at the top of the window, an angel picks up a hot coal with a pair of tongs, and instead of it burning Isaiah’s lips, he is cleansed and forgiven.

All of us at times feel inadequate for what we are called to do. We hesitate. “My job keeps me too busy.” “I don’t know how.” “I already have too many yes’s in my life.” “I am too busy.” “I am too tired to do it.” But in spite of our inadequacy, God still calls us, forgives us, enables us, and gives us renewed strength. We covet the enthusiasm of Isaiah when he cries, “Here I am! Send me!” However, when we read about the call of Jeremiah and other prophets, we realize that they too felt inadequate. Most of them never got to Isaiah’s level of enthusiasm. Some even whined and grumbled as they did God’s work – but they still did it. Our call is not as dramatic as Isaiah’s, and our work is not as prophetic. Still, we are called to work. We need to prayerfully discern how God is calling us to work for God in the world.

A second thing I want us to examine this morning comes from our first scripture reading today from Romans 8. It is the idea of our being debtors. The way the apostle Paul writes is both a blessing and a frustration. He doesn’t write and then edit his work. Instead, you can tell he is dictating a letter to a scribe. In today’s scripture reading, Paul reminds us that we are debtors, but not to the things of the flesh. In his dictation, Paul never exactly finishes this thought, never exactly telling us what we are debtors to. Instead, he goes into a discussion of how we are adopted children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ, and heirs with him. He goes so far as to have us calling God “Abba, Father.” From this part of the passage, it seems as if our debt is one of relationship.

Debts of relationship, especially, perhaps, between parent and child, are ones acknowledged, but not adequately repaid. The parent does not add up how many meals were cooked, how many loads of laundry done, how many miles and miles were driven to school and activities, and then ask for an exact accounting. “OK, you owe me six meals this week from the 22, 932 which I made for you as a child.” My family might have to get a discount for Happy Meals offset by miles driven to activities. You would have to devise your own formula! Luckily for children, there is no repayment required of the debt due. However, in relationships, there should be some kind of an acknowledgement of obligation, a mutuality in give and take.

This is true in our relationship with God. Direct payback is impossible for all of the things God has done for us. Repayment of our debt is not required for God’s love, as is true for the love of any good parent. As a people, we are forgiven by God. This is revealed to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The repayment of our debt is not necessary in order to earn our way into heaven, but still.... We recognize our debt, as we did in the hymn we just sang, “Oh, to grace how like a debtor daily I’m constrained to be.” We act as God’s people in this world not because we must, but out of gratitude and thanksgiving for what God has done for us. We acknowledge our debt, and respond with thankful action.

Ok, we’ve talked about our call to respond to God, and our debt and obligation to God. Now, thirdly, we are going to talk about the promises we’ve

made. Specifically, I want to talk about the promises we've made many times and many Sundays at the baptism of our children in this church. Since I accused Dave of hijacking my sermon content, let me get to the specifics of where I am going in this part of my sermon. It struck me as I looked at the names of the graduates in the bulletin this Sunday, that many of us have known them since they were babies. We have watched them grow in their lives of faith. In addition to the joy of seeing all those names, we have our new kindergarten children who have begun coming to worship with us. Last week we had a record number of children leave for children's church. There were 32 children who left us during the middle of the worship service. Seeing all these youth and children made me rethink how I and how you are keeping our baptismal promises to them.

If you worship here regularly, you will know how many times we as a congregation have been asked to stand up and to answer these questions. "Our Lord Jesus Christ ordered us to teach those who are baptized. Do you, the people of the church, promise to tell this child the good news of the gospel, to help him know all that Christ commands, and by your fellowship, to strengthen his family ties with the household of God?" The elder then prompts us, "If so, answer, 'We do.'" You may not specifically know any of the three babies baptized last week, or the baby who will be baptized next week, but you are part of the Church, with a capitol "C." What difference are you specifically making in the life of children in our church?

First of all, I actually want to talk to you children who are here today. I know it is hard to pay attention to this entire sermon, but wake up a little. Right now, I want to talk to you. Do you know when a baby is baptized and we all stand up and say, "We do."? Do you know what we are promising? We are promising to help other children know and feel God's love. Working to do that is hard, but one way you can do it is through the way you act. Are you kind, and welcoming? Are you friendly to other children at school and at church? One thing I see that you have to do is to decide, "Am I going to be a mean kid, or am I going to be a nice kid?" It is easier than you think to be mean. Do you know how much teasing hurts? It may seem funny to you, but it can be really hurtful. I know you know how bad bullying can be. Another way children hurt each other is with their words. Do you know what I mean? One minute a person is your best friend, and then the next minute you are telling people you hate them? You know how easy it is to be part of those dramas. But God loves you so much! God knows your name and who you are, and even knows right now how many hairs are on the top of your head! God doesn't want us to just treat people well so that we won't get in trouble. We treat each other well because God asks us to, and because we love God. How can you help the church keep its promise to other children in the church?

Now, let me talk to the youth in the church. In addition to all that stuff about being mean, you can ask yourself, "How are you welcoming others at the church?" Ignoring a new person, or a younger person, or the person who is not

from your school can feel just as hurtful as saying mean words to someone. You older youth can ask, “How am I making the new, younger youth feel welcomed and at home in the youth group?” Another thing you can do is to ask how your example affects others. When other youth see you act, and they know you go to church, what do your actions say about your faith? Are you reflecting God through your actions?

Finally, you adults. How are you directly affecting in a positive way the life of children in this church? I know all the excuses. I know the “I’m not too good at that,” excuse. You can learn a new skill! Many of us have the “I am too busy,” excuse.” But all of us are busy, and yet we all made the promise. I know the “Been there, done that,” excuse, but the promise you made at baptism was “Do you,” not “Did you promise years ago, and now you are done.” The excuse, “I don’t feel like it,” doesn’t stand up against the promises you made, either. This is not just a recruitment call, even though it takes 75 – 100 adults to run our programs each week, with nursery workers, Sunday sitters, teachers, youth leaders and more. I am certain that the people recruiting for these positions would be happy to take your name. But if you are not involved in the direct leadership and teaching of children, how can you reach out to individual children, whether in you extended family or in the world of God’s children? You can do this through prayer, and letting the child know you are praying for them. You can send cards, mentor, and coach. You can do it through a kind word, a thought, a call. It is not easy, but you need to ask how you, each of you children, youth and adults, are showing God’s love to children each week, or each month. How does a child feel loved and welcomed because of you?

The words for today are a “call,” a “debt,” and a “promise.” Isaiah’s call by God was to loftier things than ours, but even though we feel inadequate to the task, we are to respond with enthusiasm to God’s call to action. The Apostle Paul tells us we must recognize our debt. God has given so much to us, that we can never pay it back, and luckily for us, God does not demand a one on one repayment. But we can also acknowledge our debt and respond to God’s gifts to us with thanksgiving and with action. Finally, to our specific promises to raise a new generation in faith. What is each of us doing to fulfill these promises? Which child feels differently because of your prayer, or concern, or care, or love? Today, this is a call to action, a debt to remember, and a promise to fulfill. With God’s help, may we have the skill, the desire, and the ability to respond, “Here I am, Lord! Send me!”

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