

Sermon on Jeremiah 1, 4-10, 13.08.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

4)Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, 5)“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.” 6)Then I said, “Ah, LORD GOD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.” 7)But the LORD said to me, “Do not say ‘I am only a youth’; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. 8)Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” 9)Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. 10)See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

Dear Congregation,

My very first sermon was based on this text, the calling of Jeremiah. I was then 26 years old and have felt exactly as the prophet: I am not cut out to preach, for I am too young. – No preaching experience, and on average, the visitors in the church service were twice as old as I was. What have I actually to say? How should I say it? Will they even listen to me? – There was a friendly reaction at the exit, probably because the congregation had sensed how nervous I was. However, what I will never forget is that there was family in friends sitting in the service; also two, of whom I knew that they would never enter a church of their own will. They sat further back, towering above all church visitors who sat in front of them and grinned at me encouragingly. Here were two, who could not care less what I said, yet, who wanted to show me unmistakably that they supported me: “You will do fine, we believe in you.”

The topic today: “What is a calling?” Some time ago, I have already defined this topic. The more surprising it was for me, when I was questioned about it at summer camp. A young person asked me how I understand a calling. My answer was this:

To me, a calling is, when God intervenes in my life and leads me in a different direction. I have experienced that there is much truth in the saying: Man thinks and God guides; or, as someone once said: If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans. I had to learn in my life to listen to God’s voice. That was not a voice in the actual sense, God has not appeared to me, and I have not heard audible voices. And still, the more I have occupied myself with God and grown in my faith, the more I have been able to recognize God’s hand in my daily life. Above all, I have realized that there were far less coincidences than I had previously thought. Often, only in retrospect have I clearly seen that my life’s path, which appeared crooked and lop-sided to me, was straight in God’s view.

Why have I become a Pastor?

I have met my wife when I was 14. Her family was considerably more religious than mine. She has persuaded me to come to church, which I declined in the beginning and then went with great hesitation. Together we went to a church youth group. We went to Church Festivals, which appealed to me greatly and in the end I was full of enthusiasm. She had advised me to study theology. I have done this because I wanted to know whether faith was really “something”. I have experienced that thinking and believing, that spirituality and knowledge are no contradictions. I have experienced that people, on my long road to the office of a pastor, have had confidence in me again and again, and have asked me whether I did not want to do certain things. That has made it possible for me to test myself, to gain experience. Success and passing exams have further motivated me and taken away the self-doubts.

As at the time after the first church service, I knew, of course, what I could have done better; and according to my disposition, I still know this even today after a church service. This you could have said more clearly. Why did you make that slip of the tongue, why did you speak so fast? These thoughts always come, and if not from me, then from my severest and most loving critics, my family.

But I have also gained confidence. And, above all, what astonishes me every time, that God uses me to change the life of other people somewhat. And I think that herein lays not only my calling, but that of all of us, namely, to be God's hands, feet and voice in this world and to do what is of use for others.

That was a long, personal answer to the question, what I, Stefan Wolf, think, what (my) calling is. I believe that there can be no general answer to this question, but always and a concrete personal answer. Where the Bible speaks of a calling, it does not only relate to such events as here in the case of Jeremiah. There is not only one text about the true calling. It is followed by an entire book about the consequences of this calling. Reports follow about how their lives change through the calling. A calling is always the beginning of a process. In my experience, there is not only a single calling, for instance, to become a pastor. There are many small events which, in the end, give life a certain direction. Not everyone can or must become a prophet or a pastor. There are limitless opportunities to be God's helpers.

A calling has something to do how a person lives his life in harmony with God and trusts in God, but at the same time realizes that because of this he faces challenges.

I found this nice story about a man who had sown something and now asked God for rain, because he thought it would be good if his seeds sprouted. Then he asked God for sun, so that his plants would grow, too, and he received it. When it appeared to become too dry, he asked for rain again. And so, God gave him the weather according to his wishes. However, the grain did not grow, it looked meager, and so he thought that there would be a crop failure in the land, until he saw the grain of another man stand in full ripeness. Dear brother, said the man, how can it be that your grain looks so well, and nothing has grown in my fields? The other man said to him: You wanted to be wiser than God and teach him weather-making; therefore, nothing grew in your fields. I have let him make the weather as he pleased, and so I have received beautiful grain (Johannes Geiler von Kayeserberg, 1445-1510).

Shall I do what I want, or shall I accept God's actions? Do I just want what I think is good for me, or do I trust in God and not ask him for sun and rain, rather ask him that with his help and according to his plan something can grow in my life?

Jeremiah is taught in this text that it does not matter what he thinks, but it is only what God wants from him that counts. 7) *But the LORD said to me, "Do not say 'I am only a youth'; for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak.*

In Jeremiah's calling it is not about what he does, or what he wants to do, but whether he can totally and completely trust in God. In all stories of a calling it is about faith.

It is then about how faith stands the test in Jeremiah's work. His example and also other stories of prophets in the Bible are, of course, more extreme than how I have experienced this personally. I am no prophet, everyone knows that. I have not been imprisoned on account of my faith, I have not been displaced, and I have never had to bring such a gravely important and even threatening message to non-believers, as Jonah, for instance. I did not have to do what God expected here of Jonah, and I would not even know how I could do it: 10) *See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.*

However, I know, too, that I could not refuse, if I were in a situation to do exactly that. A calling has something to do with the fact that one does not really choose the situation oneself.

I have attempted to do things where it became obvious that they were not right. On the other hand, God has put me into situations, which I have not chosen myself; I even was unaware of their existence, until the time they happened. More and more, I have clearly realized, why particularly I should do something at this point, in this situation – and then, truly, there was no choice.

A calling has also something to do with God promoting something in us and then using it for his purposes. The question regarding the abilities and talents we possess is, therefore, not unimportant. God gives us talents, but they have a direction and a purpose. We shall use these talents for the good of others and in God's honour.

How do I know, or how do you know then, that a calling is not just an imagination?

Time and again I have met people who insisted that God had selected them for a certain cause. That has always made me nervous. There are people, too, who brag about their achievements and talents and about what God has done through them. I think, he who has a true calling, does not brag about it; neither does he make a profit through it. That Person knows all too well, that it is absolutely not his own merit. In a sense, there is no "proof" of a calling, as there is no proof of faith, of God's existence and God's guidance. It is an impression, a feeling, something that is clear in retrospect, that we know it is so.

I have met people who, in regards to their calling, were convincing to me, because there was something that affected them unexpectedly and was a surprise to them.

Many are called, only few are chosen. I think this is easy to understand. Not everyone who is called must be a prophet. And not everyone who considers himself a prophet has to be chosen or called. All of us, dear Congregation, however, are called to follow Christ. Recently I read: "A person finds the trail to his calling, when he keeps the question alive 'What is God's plan for my life?'"

This is a question which only faith can pose. It is, however, a question, which every Christian has to ask himself, so that we do not overlook what God's plans for us are.

We are called. Karl Barth, the famous German theologian has said that God has thereby freed us for himself. God liberates us for himself. God liberates us to serve him and our neighbour. We often say that we believe in God, but in truth, God believes in us and in our possibilities. As we trust in God, so he has confidence in us, in every one of us. And who knows, what can come of this.

Amen.

And the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.