

United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
Fayetteville, NY 13066
June 7, 2009
Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even
HAVE CHAPSTICK, WILL TRAVEL Isaiah 6: 1-8

I have a confession to make. At home, I occasionally practice "call screening." If I am busy, I let phone pick up, then decide I whether to interrupt myself just then. Once, my brother called. When I answered, he said in an aggrieved tone, "I've been screened."

"The good news, is 'You made the cut.'"

I remembered that occasion as I read Isaiah's words: "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Isaiah was practicing an early form of call screening. In the face of an incoming message of questionable appeal, Isaiah placed a barrier between himself and the call: "I'm not fit. I live among people who are unfit." Even then, there was already a long faith tradition for that kind of response: Sarah said, "Who are you kidding, Lord? I am 90 years old." Moses said, "I stutter. Try Aaron." The prophet Jeremiah, said, "Hey, I'm just a kid." Isaiah's response was one of humble regret that he didn't have the skills or talent to do what the Lord asked. It's always a gracious note to strike when turning down a request. "I am honored, but, really, I am not good enough. Surely you can find someone more talented than me." (The Nominating Committee is on to you).

More importantly for us today, as we ordain and install officers, however, is the fact that this is not the first time Isaiah has received such a call. This one comes after the days of his youthful naiveté have passed. He has served the community of faith through the reigns of two kings. If nothing else, he has learned his own limits: He remembers the words he's said or didn't say, things he'd done or not done, things that he would do differently now. St. Paul asks us to "Consider our own calls, brothers and sisters: not many of us were wise by human standards, not many were powerful ..." Even the best of us are aware of our human limits and failings. Once night, after a discouraging day on the scaffolding of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo wrote in his journal, "I am not a painter." Self-aware, at first call, we respond, "We're not perfect. We're human. We have unclean lips."

Isaiah doesn't stop with humility about his own limits. He points to the ones he serves: "Look, Lord, they forget my best stuff by the time they are in the parking lot." "It was a wonderful lesson plan until Jenny gave Sammy a haircut in the back of the room and while I was wiping those tears, Jeff dyed the goldfish green." "I slaved for hours and all they noticed was that one little typo." "All those months planning and they cut the budget in half. What did they think the building would look like?"

It's not just the people. The situation doesn't help. "King Uzziah just died. Shouldn't we wait until we break in a new king before starting a project this big?" "The chair of the committee moved to New Jersey." "Not everyone is passionate about the same things I am passionate about." "The economy is bad." "Fewer people are in the church than ever before." "There are the poor, the environment, all the justice issues, crime in the city, health care problems – where do we start?" "What difference can we make?" "We live among a people of unclean lips."

“I am one of unclean lips.” “I live among a people of unclean lips.” God doesn’t say, “It’s not true.” God doesn’t wave angel wings over the picture, airbrushing away the wrinkled reality. God does respond however. “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal ... “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Tssss! So much for unclean lips!

That scene reminds me of another. The youth group leader at the church where I was baptized threw the best parties in town. Roger served the same menu every time – homemade hot wings. If the wind was right, your sinuses started to drain on the front lawn. You could always tell those of us who had been there before. We arrived waving our tubes of chapstick -- knowing the price we would pay for being included on this guest list. Tssss! Have chapstick. Will travel. Tssss! So much for unclean lips! The Lord Who made us knows and accepts that we are human. The Lord asks us to be aware of our limits, not paralyzed by them, -- to be willing to learn, to grow, and to serve together.

Curiously, or perhaps not so curiously, there is no mention of God’s response to Isaiah’s claim that the people of God are not perfect. Or as a speaker at a recent preaching conference said, “News bulletin just in. ‘There are weeds in the wheat.’” What is the response to obvious and eternal truth? There probably wasn’t a Hebrew word for “Duh!” Instead God said, “Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send? It’s all true... You have limits and there is a world full of apparently overwhelming need. The question stands. Who will go?” Isaiah, having discovered his own weaknesses and the frailty of the world he was called to serve, was, nonetheless, still willing to say, through blistered lips, “Have chapstick, will travel.” “Here I am ... I will go.”

Often, especially the first time we answer such a call, we close our eyes to all that Isaiah has seen, to all that we ourselves have seen and with self-blinded enthusiasm, say, “Here we are. We will go.” I would dare to suggest that today, when we ordain and install our officers, we all renew our sense of call. At the same time, let us not close our eyes to the reality of who we are, of the frailties of those with whom we serve, the challenges of being church in the world today or to the very real needs of that world. Rather let our eyes be opened by our years of service, by our education inside and outside the church, by the awareness of not only who we have been, but who we are. Then and only then, can we, like Isaiah, say, “Have chapstick, will travel.” “Here we are ... We will go.” If we do that, we can open ourselves to the true power of God’s call, to the possibility of what it means to be in God’s service for our sakes and for the sake of the world. For the foolishness of God is such that even with difficult circumstances, off-beat timing, chipped and blemished bodies, bruised egos, limited skills and variable tempers, in a rapidly changing culture, nation and world – wonderful things can and do happen.

In his May commencement address at the University of Portland, Paul Hawken (of Smith and Hawken) said, “What I see everywhere in the world are ordinary people willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in order to restore some semblance of grace, justice and beauty to this world. The poet Adrienne Rich wrote, “So much has been destroyed that I cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.” ... Hawken continued: “You join a multitude of caring people. No one knows how many groups and organizations are working on the most salient issues of our day: climate change, poverty, deforestation, peace, water, hunger, conservation, human rights and more.... Inspiration is not garnered in the litanies of what may befall us; it resides in humanity’s willingness to restore, redress, reform, recover, re-imagine and reconsider.”

While not intentionally theological, Hawken reminds us that, just as we celebrated last week, God's Spirit has been poured out on all God's sons and daughters in every place. God's children dream dreams and see visions. Under the influence of that Spirit, your Board is currently engaged in an extensive strategic planning effort. That means that like the officers who come forward in a few moments, like the officers already serving, in the days, weeks, months and years ahead, the vision of Isaiah will come to each one of us. Through the voice of this congregation, the words will be uttered "Whom shall we send?" "Who will go?"

When we answer God's call and allow ourselves to be sent we join people in every place working to transform the world. We join God's people in every age. We join Isaiah who was neither blind to reality, nor paralyzed by it – Isaiah, who became, not a naysayer, not a pundit, not a cynic, but a prophet of hope for all time. When we say, "Have chapstick. Will travel." "Here we are ... We will go." we do not merely step into a hopeful future. We lead the way toward a day where in blazing, blinding moments of grace, our best-case scenarios are left in the dust by divinely inspired, but very fleshed reality.

"Whom shall we send?" "Who will go?"

The air hums with the waiting for our answer.

Remember, bring chapstick.