

Congregational United Church of Christ
Sermon, Sunday, **January 15, 2012**
"Called and Recalled" Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18
Rev. Rex Piercy,

Today we continue our journey in "Ordinary Time." Through these weeks after Christmas and before the start of Lent, our readings are divided into two distinct streams. The Old Testament/Psalm and Gospel all focus around themes of calling to discipleship and the ministries into which Jesus calls his disciples. The Epistle readings focus on basic "lifeways" or "practice patterns" of Christian discipleship. All of these texts are rich, but today we hear only the Psalm for this day – Psalm 139. Yet in a real sense, I think these ancient words of Hebrew poetry speak to all these things.

Have you ever asked yourself, how do I know it's God calling me?

Have you heard a voice, an inner voice, had an urge, and dreamed a dream that seemed to be calling you to take a next step or to launch out in a new direction? How do you discover that the voice you are hearing is God's? Before you can answer that question, there is another.

How do we listen for the voice of God?

A recent study of prayer practices in one mainline denomination (it could have been the UCC but it wasn't) indicated that only sixteen percent of the surveyed

congregations had in place any intentional processes to teach people to pray. As the study notes, congregations seem simply to assume that people will learn these practices on their own; but as this Scripture reveals, prayer turns out to be something that does not "come naturally" to many people; it doesn't to me. Does it to you? Most of us need to be taught. So who teaches prayer? Who taught you? And what are we doing here in this congregation that helps us attend both to our lives and our work and to the guidance we are receiving from God? Part of the problem is that we too often have limited this idea that God is "calling" to those of us who have gone into the ordained ministry. Yet perhaps better than in some other places in the wider church, congregations of the UCC like this one know that "real" ministry is much bigger than pastoring a congregation. Here, I hope, everyone considers what the voice of God may be asking you to do in the contexts where you find yourselves.

What exactly is a call to discipleship?

A call to discipleship, and then what the life and ministry of disciples involves, is at the heart of all these readings we will hear over the next five weeks. Without being simplistic, we see the call to

discipleship in its very simplest form in Jesus' call to the disciples to follow him. Please note as you recall those stories of Jesus calling his disciples that the call was not, "Become a preacher." Nor was it "Change the world." The call was to follow Jesus. It was a call to become Jesus' apprentice. It was a call to learn how Jesus lived and to learn to do the same.

There are still a few professions that offer apprenticeships before one enters into practice for oneself. Medicine is among them. So are a number of the building trades (plumbing, electrical, ironworking, to name a few). Some of you here have been through such a residency, or apprenticeship, or internship to experience in a hands-on way, day to day following and learning from your teachers.

The early church had such a thing. Early Christianity had a three-year "apprenticeship" called the **catechumenate**. Our Confirmation practices come out of that tradition, as well as our Lenten customs. This was a time when one or a few others in the community would come alongside those seeking to become Christians to teach them, day by day, what it takes to follow Jesus. Early Methodism, along with some other groups, had a similar process with trial class meetings that lasted about six months as folk were learning how to live the baptismal

covenant by learning how and helping one another practice the art of faithful living. In the early Methodist world for example, only after being in a trial class meeting for six months could people apply to become members of the Methodist Society. And if they were accepted, they would continue in a "regular" class meeting to continue to help them grow in their faithfulness to Christ.

I think the church has a role to play here. We ought to make such a thing a "norm" for active participation in the life of the church. After all, this is the place where you learn to get ready to say "Yes" to following Jesus. Churches need to be all about making disciples, forming Christians, for a lifetime of following Jesus. And this is serious work. And it doesn't really happen here in this sanctuary, though it helps a whole lot to be here if you are going to be serious about following Jesus. But real Christian shaping and formation, real Christian disciple-making, happens best in small groups where folks build discipling relationships with others in their daily lives. Everyone in the church ought to be in some kind of covenant disciple small group, where on a week to week basis, we hold each other accountable in our growth as Christians and help each other mark the way of following Jesus.

What should disciples expect? Why would you answer this call?

Disciples should expect lots of ordinary life, to be sure. To follow a person as a disciple means you are with that person most of the time. And most of the time most people, including Jesus, are doing fairly ordinary things, such as walking, or eating, or sleeping.

But Jesus also offers something that may be easily missed or misread. When Jesus called his disciples, he told them to be ready to see the existing world order broken into and invaded by God. Discipleship in Jesus involves becoming able to see the opening of God's world and reign into this world and its powers in real time. It means we get to see what others so easily miss -- that this world, as it is, is deeply broken in ways that only God can, will and does restore. It also means participating in this "invasion" as it happens.

So who among you has a testimony of seeing God invade this world? Do you? Do you? I think we should be hearing these testimonies on a regular basis, maybe even weekly, right here in this service. This Jesus whom we worship here in this very room and follow out there in the world is the pathway to seeing God. If we are his disciples, you and me, we will come to know this as

we follow him. The real question for us this morning is, do you expect this? How are we inviting others to expect this?

Last fall, in my final sermon before the start of my sabbatical, I preached a sermon on Psalm 139. In it I said that "Our story is not about our search for God, but of God's search for us." "God makes the first move; God understands our being; God is conversant with our most personal inner life. God's seeking removes all panic from our faith and all anxiety from our hope." I believe that still.

Many of you may be familiar with the writing of the later Peter Gomes, the preacher to Harvard University. By the way I like that title, Preacher to..., not preacher of. Anyway, in his book about the Bible called THE GOOD BOOK he writes: "Well, there is good news, and that is why they call it the gospel. The news is not that we are worse than we think, it is that we are better than we think, and better than we deserve to be. Why? Because at the very bottom of the whole enterprise is the indisputable fact that we are created, made, formed, invented, patented in the image of goodness itself. This I what it means, that is how one translates being created in the image of God: it means to be created in the image of goodness itself...Self-worth, self-esteem, self-value, these are not essays in mere

ego, these are essays in divinity...the stuff of goodness and godliness itself, and it is that image that provides security and serenity in the world. People may take everything away from you, they may deprive you of everything you have and value, but they cannot take away from you the fact that you are a child of God and bear the impression of God in your very soul. You cannot be destroyed, and that cannot be denied.”

What Gomes means is what the ancient writer of Psalm 139 meant - that God is with us at the core of our very being, deeper than anything the scientists, bless their hearts, can ever measure or understand. No matter what, God knows us, each and everyone of us. We are precious in God’s sight. Or as the late Dr. King wrote from the cell of a Birmingham jail, ““Why be anxious? Come what may, God is able. Surely God is able.”

So, this morning as we move on in this so-called “ordinary“ time in our lives and in the church, I hope and pray that each of us and all of us together in this faith community can find ways to live together that bring us into the everlasting way of companionship with God by following Jesus. That is really all we can do, isn’t it? –just bring ourselves – and be ready to hear when God calls?

Let us pray:

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak

In living echoes of thy tone;

As thou hast sought, so let me seek

Thine erring children lost and lone.

O strengthen me, O teach me, O fill me,

O use me, Lord, use even me,

Just as thou wilt, and when, and where,

Until thy blessed face I see,

Thy rest, thy joy, thy glory share. Amen.