

Twenty-three young teenagers were sitting at their desks in the classroom, their minds focused on anything and everything but the complicated algebra problem their teacher was writing on the board. Suddenly, the teacher announced: “I need a volunteer to come up here to solve this simple binomial equation.” Immediately, students became deeply involved with the books on their desks. Pencils dropped to the floor. Eyes became fixed on a page, any page, in textbooks. Nobody dared to look at the teacher. “Joey, what about you?” The teacher asked. “Come and show us how it’s done.”

Joey’s heart sank to the bottom of his Nikes. “Why me?” he thought. “I’ll look like a fool. That teacher has it in for me for no reason.” Joey rapidly sorted through his mental file of excuses: bad back, flu, torn hamstring muscle, chalk allergy, dental appointment. Nothing seemed appropriate. He slowly dragged himself to the board. “Come on, Joey. I’ll be up here with you,” encouraged his teacher. “We’ll go through this together.” Joey picked up the chalk as his mind went totally blank.

Perhaps you remember being there, in that situation. Fear, humiliation, uncertainty....You didn’t know what to do; your “excuses cupboard” didn’t work, and you ended up having no choice but to step forward.

That’s what happened to another young boy, Jeremiah, about 627 B.C.(B.C.E. - “Before the Common Era”), in a small town just three miles northeast of Jerusalem. It wasn’t the words of a math teacher that startled Jeremiah, but the word of God. It was not a call to solve a complex math problem that he resisted, but a call to be a prophet to nations that were in great political, military, and religious turmoil. (Think of Syria, Pakistan, Iran, and the Israelis and Palestinians today.) It was not a call to stay in the classroom, but a call to “Go wherever I send you and speak whatever I command you.” The Lord did not ask Jeremiah to perform a relatively easy task based on a previous homework assignment, but a huge and hard task: to shatter the complacency of an entire people, “to break down, to destroy, and to overthrow” (v. 10), and, while incurring the wrath of both his peers and government leaders, “to build and to plant” seeds of renewal and hope. This surely was an impossible mission, one that would without a doubt lead to controversy, rejection, beatings, and banishment. This was a hard, tough call!

Jeremiah lived in a time of upheaval. The international scene was changing fast. Once-powerful Assyria to the northwest had become overextended in its vast empire. Egypt to the south was regaining its military strength. Babylonia to the northeast was beginning to flex its military muscles. And in the middle of these superpowers was tiny Judah with its capital, Jerusalem, struggling to survive all the threats on the horizon.

Judah’s leaders tried to make all sorts of political treaties. The religious leaders even incorporated the worship of Assyrian and Babylonian gods into the temple worship of the Lord. Now, in the midst of this chaos, the word of God came to Jeremiah, pressing him to accept a new task and a new relationship he was reluctant to assume. The Word of the Lord continued to be the driving force for Jeremiah throughout his forty-year ministry. For Jeremiah, God offered a

hard, controversial, and often disheartening road.

It was not so different for Jesus. In our Gospel lesson, Jesus went to his hometown, Nazareth, on the Sabbath, entered the synagogue, read from the prophet Isaiah, then sat down and declared that in him the promise that good news would be given to the poor, release to the prisoners, etc., was fulfilled. At first, the hometown folks beamed with pride. This is Joseph's boy! He grew up right down the street!

But then came trouble. Instead of basking in the people's compliments, Jesus started challenging them: "You're going to tell me to heal myself, but prophets are never welcomed in their own hometowns..." Then he proceeded to BE a prophet, saying things the people did not want to hear. To these faithful synagogue-goers, Jesus declared that God was free to heal and save *wherever* God found faith, even among Gentiles, the non-Jews. Jesus challenged his people's belief that they alone were God's chosen people, and that salvation was theirs exclusively.

The people of Nazareth did not want to think that outsiders - non-Jews like the widow Elijah had helped (1 Kings 17) or the leper Naaman (2 Kings 5) or the Gentiles in Capernaum (where Jesus had worked many miracles)- might be included in the Good News of the Messiah. They would not hear of it and so rejected Jesus, just as the religious authorities later plotted to kill him because he was challenging them and including and associating with all the wrong people.

The people had tried hard to be good Jews, and now this Jesus was saying that salvation could come to others as well! They rose up in anger against him and drove him out of town. As they tried to throw him over a cliff, he walked through their midst. It was not yet Jesus' time to die. He was called to a hard mission, and he would finish it. It was a tough call, a call to enter into deep religious controversy. It was a call that led Jesus through temptation and discouragement as people misunderstood him and as his own disciples let him down. This mission would lead Jesus to suffering and death on the cross.

What about us? What is our call? Are we being asked by God to do something hard, like forgive somebody who has hurt us or reach out to folks who scare us? You see, if I am really preaching Christ and we are serious about letting Jesus be our Lord, there's a better than good chance that he's going to ask us to do something hard and controversial! That's what he did, and what he continues to do today! If we follow Jesus, God may want us to look at life or other people differently, in a challenging way.

A story. All Saints' had always been a very wealthy church. Its 300 members usually gave a combined annual offering of over a million dollars - because they could afford to do so. Over the years, however, the neighborhood around the beautiful church had begun to change. Immigrants flocked to the area, changing the complexion of the community. Steel bars replaced welcome signs in store windows. Homeless people could be found wandering the sidewalks and streets. The changes made some members of All Saints' quite uncomfortable. They usually tried to avoid that part of town except on Sundays and started trying to have all meetings on Sundays instead of at night.

One Sunday, shortly after a young associate priest had joined the church staff, the church members were gathered after the morning service for coffee and pastries. In the spring months they loved to gather in the flower garden outside the church, among its fountains, gazebos, and vine-covered arches. As the elegantly-dressed worshipers sipped coffee and chatted in the garden, a homeless man shuffled in off the street. He entered through the garden gate without looking at anyone. But all eyes were certainly on him. He quietly walked over to the table where expensive pastries were displayed on silver trays. He picked up one of the pastries and bit into it, keeping his eyes closed. Then he reached for a second pastry and placed it in his coat pocket. Moving slowly and trying not to be noticed, he put another into the same pocket.

The garden buzzed with whispers. Finally one of the women walked over to the new priest and said, “Well, *DO* something!” Still feeling a little awkward in his new position, the young priest handed his coffee cup to the woman, walked over to the table, and stood next to the homeless man. He reached under the table where the empty pastry boxes had been stored. Then he picked up one of the silver trays loaded with pastries and emptied them into one of the boxes. He did the same with a second tray of expensive goodies. Then he closed the lids on the boxes and held them out to the homeless man.

“We’re here every Sunday,” the priest said. The man smiled at the priest, cradled the boxes in his arms, and shuffled quietly out of the garden and down the street. The priest returned to his coffee cup, smiled at the woman who was holding it, and said, “That’s what you meant when you said ‘Do something,’ wasn’t it?” (Wayne Rice *Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks 4*, and other sources).

Here we are in life. Each of us has been given abilities and some amount of time. And each of us, no matter how young or old we are, has choices as we go through our lives. The Gospel of Jesus Christ would have us hear a tough call, one that often will be controversial, for Jesus looks out at the homeless, the hungry, the weak, the hurting people of this world and our community and says to us: “If you are following me, do something!”

It’s hard to know what to do, how to really help, especially when we here in Winsted have such limited resources. But you try, in big ways. You keep that food pantry open, you offer the community your thrift shop. You see the negatives of the way some folks are working the system or making bad choices in their lives, but you don’t let that keep you from also seeing each person as somebody hungry for food and for meaning and for God in his/her life. It’s a tough call, trying to be a follower of Jesus Christ here; but it’s hard to follow him wherever you live. Because Jesus asks us to trust God and to show love to others even when they don’t show any love back, and to forgive folks when they don’t deserve it. The good news is, though Jesus’ call is tough, he stays with us all the way through it. We are not alone as we try to be faithful.

I treasure the oft-told story of the boy walking in the woods with his grandfather. His grandpa wanted to test the boy's sense of direction, so he asked him, “Which way to town?” The boy replied, “I don’t know.” “Well, how do we get back to my cabin?” “I don’t know.” “Where are we heading now?” “I don’t know,” the boy once again replied. “If you don’t know where you

are, boy, then you're lost!" the grandpa said to the boy. The boy replied, "No I'm not. I'm with you!"

Well, if we are with God, and God is with us, we will never be lost. Our intellects may finally fail us; our sense of direction may not work well all the time; but if we let God, God will keep us from being lost in life. God promised Jeremiah, and God promises each of us, "I will be with you." Jesus' last words to his disciples: "Behold, I am with you, even to the end of the age." (Mtt. 28)

There's a lot wrong in this world, and there are a lot of people who don't believe that anybody at all cares about them. May each of us listen for the tough and challenging call of our Lord, and do something! In Jesus' name, Amen.