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# The Three Calls of the Christian Community<sup>1</sup>

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**Texts: Isaiah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11  
(C - Epiphany 5)**

For the first time in my recent memory, religion played a *visible* role in the political process. I say religion, not faith, because that is the way the media and politicians framed the discussion. Who among us was not unaware that Stockwell Day did not campaign on Sundays? I say religion, not faith, because the public is much more comfortable with a religion that is tame than with the passions and convictions that come with faith. Who among us didn't hear the expression of concern about Mr. Day's "socially conservative" religion and the counter claim that religion was personal and would not affect the government's choices — as if the passionate loyalties and convictions of faith can just be turned off! I say religion, not faith, because many Christians in a less public way had a difficult time sorting out the separation between policies that support the hedonistic civil religion of an individualistic consumer society as opposed to what faith requires of a Christian in an ever more globalized world. Who among us didn't hear that daily clarion confession that greater prosperity will come only if we have deeper and bigger tax cuts for people who already have more than they need and incessantly argue they deserve even more? Yes, religion, not faith, was indeed publicly at work in our recent election.

This focus on "religion" — as simplistic and erroneous as it was — does raise important questions for us as people of faith. While others may debate the role of religion in public life, we, as Christians, might well ask as the prophet Micah so succinctly put the question in another time, "What *does* the Lord require of us" in this time and in our public life? Stephen Carter has written that we live in a "culture of disbelief" where faith has been trivialized as something that rational and intelligent people do not admit to in their public life. As much as I am opposed to many of the policies of the Alliance Party, I do think the

public negative characterization of the faithful dumped on it raises a serious question not only for each of us Christians but also for our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada which has not found a sufficient answer to this question, “What *does* the Lord require of Christians in this time in our public life?” Or, to put it in a different way, “What is our vocation as Lutheran Christians in Canada and in the world?”

Martin Marty has described the church today as like a football team in a “huddle.” People on the outside know that something is happening in there; they are not sure what, and they wish they could see what it is. Our struggle as Christians is to come out of the huddle, stop talking with ourselves, and engage the world with the Gospel of Life. This morning’s readings remind us of what is required of us in the three callings of the Christian community. We are a prophetic community! We are an apostolic community! We are a community of disciples!

Christians are called to be a *prophetic community*. In our first reading God calls the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah has some pretty troubling things to say to the people of Israel, and here he lays out his credentials. He is the one who has a message from Yahweh the Lord of Hosts. The people have hardened their hearts; they do not care any more about God’s intentions. Isaiah makes it clear that much of the fault lies with the leaders: they listen but do not comprehend; they look but do not understand; they make the minds of the people dull; and they fail to help the people turn and be healed. The prophet brings an uncomfortable word of judgment.

Christians are called to be a prophetic community — to speak a word of *public truth*. This word of public truth is a hard word that reminds society of its failures and summons society to God’s path of Justice. If we are only telling the world what it wants to hear, what truth is there in that? Israel had its court prophets and cult prophets who reinforced the nationalism of their day. We are called to speak a word of public truth.

Christians are called, also, to be an *apostolic community*. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul is laying out his credentials as an apostle. In the face of the sceptical, Paul says, “I encountered Jesus, and it was a life-changing event.” Paul recites the apostolic tradition in which he stands. Jesus appeared to Cephas, then to the original twelve, then to 500 brothers and sisters in one place, then to James. And then Paul points out, “Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle,



because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:8-9).

Many of us may feel that we, too, could easily say this of our own faith experience: *Last of all, as to one untimely born, he has appeared also to me.* In the face of our uncertainties, we need to be reminded that we too stand in the same line of apostles as does Paul. As members of the church we too are an *apostolic community*. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have been life-changing for us. We all know people who have had life-changing events or trips (not just those who have taken a vacation and insist on showing you each of their hundreds of pictures with commentary!). There are usually two reactions to life-changing experiences: the exuberant people who just can't wait to tell you, "You won't believe what happened!" And reluctant people, who seem to act as if nothing happened but who eventually are willing to say, "You will not believe this but you know what happened?" Exuberant or reluctant, Paul reminds us that apostles are witnesses to a God-event so life-affirming, life-changing, and life-giving that it governs their entire life, demands their ultimate loyalty, and insists on being shared with others. Such an apostolic imperative is often not welcomed by governments, especially not by oppressive regimes, which rightly understand that such loyalties ultimately undermine their power over citizens. We are an apostolic community.

And we are also a *community of disciples*. The Gospel reading is a familiar account of the calling of Peter and other disciples. Though we have heard it many times, this account reminds us that while we need to be a prophetic community with a public truth to tell, and an apostolic community with a message of hope and life, we are as well a community of disciples which puts that truth and that message into practice. In Jesus' time it was not uncommon for rabbis, prophets, teachers and other leaders to have their disciples. (Not unlike our own times when personalities attract adoring fans — need I mention the Super Bowl or the Back Street Boys!) Jesus' disciples were to be different: "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." Unlike the disciples of the rabbis, whose job it was to memorize every word of their teacher, Jesus' disciples are to take the teachings and put them into practice (e.g., the sending of the Seventy). Or, to put it more simply, Jesus links knowing and doing; such is to be the nature of "Christian" discipleship.

What makes this story so amazing is realizing that we are reading it knowing fully the conclusion. Luke tells us of Peter's call with the full

knowledge of Peter's great weaknesses and failings that were to come: his impetuosity, his pride, his arrogance, and his ultimate betrayal of Jesus. Yet in spite of his stumbling, Peter is the rock on which Christ founds the church. This is no small encouragement to those of us who may not feel up to the task, to those distracted by the world, or to those of us preoccupied with ourselves.

When faced with the question, "What *does* the Lord require of us in this time and in our public life?" the answer in part — at least for us Lutherans — is being joined to God and others in Baptism in order to be a prophetic and apostolic community of disciples in Canada and in the world. Often we try to omit or skip over one or more of these marks of our vocation. This is what can happen in public life, or in the workplace, or in the way the media discuss churches. Society is comfortable with a religion people can possess, but not with a faith that possesses people.

This is probably why our society is comfortable with a church that stays in the "huddle." And this is probably why it is time for us always to get back into the "game" of engaging the world. As a prophetic and apostolic community of disciples, we have a mission. I know you [Mount Zion Lutheran Church] have been engaged in this mission through your Open Sesame program [nursery school for special needs children] and through your Parish Nurse program, efforts to provide housing for seniors, shelters for women in abusive relationships, and other efforts undertaken over the years.

At the risk of seeming somewhat simplistic, being a prophetic and apostolic community of disciples is why in our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada we have the Global Hunger and Development Appeal (GHDA). Some people are content just to send money to help feed the hungry or house the homeless — noble and worthy motivations. But for many of us within the Lutheran Community this is insufficient. Yes, through GHDA we send help when disaster strikes like the recent earthquake in El Salvador or India. And yes, through GHDA we support development initiatives in far away places, such as the water and agricultural projects in Ethiopia and Eritrea. And yes, through GHDA our church has supported Out of the Cold programs to shelter the homeless, congregational food banks, urban missions and literacy projects across Canada. These are more than worthy and noble efforts. However, for our church they are an expression of who we are and a response to the life-changing Christ event we have witnessed as an apostolic community.



And yes, through GHDA we do bring visitors to Canada to speak and develop educational resources that point to the causes of hunger and poverty. And yes, through GHDA we call governments to account when human dignity is not respected and human rights violated, or when the rich take more than they will ever need and the poor are sent away hungry and homeless. And yes, through GHDA we support those letter-writing campaigns and petitions which send a hard and troubling message to those in power, and offer them alternatives. The aim is not just to be politically troubling to those in positions of power; it is our prophetic responsibility as a community of disciples continually to redeem those institutions from the principalities and powers which corrupt them and distract them from their divine purpose of serving the well-being of all our neighbors.

We may be tempted to think of GHDA as just another program of the church. But I think that GHDA is the way our ELCIC niggles, nags, prods, pushes, and maybe even drags us as a church back into the public square. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a famous Jewish theologian, wrote some years ago, "In biblical days prophets were astir while the world was asleep; today the world is astir while churches and synagogues are busy with trivialities."

When we fill our envelope with something for GHDA...

When our church council needs to make its annual commitment...

When we go to the Ten Days for Global Justice meeting to learn more...

When we write that letter to our local member of parliament...

...we move beyond the ecclesiastical trivialities. We catch a glimpse of the world beyond the huddle, and take up our call to be a prophetic community with a public truth to share, an apostolic community with a message of hope and life, and a community of disciples with the compassion and courage to serve our neighbors.

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> Preached at Mount Zion Lutheran Church, Waterloo Ontario, 4 February 2001.