

Called Out By God

Sermon, January 16, 2011

Texts: Isaiah 62:1-5; I Corinthians 1:1-9

Let me ask: What comes to your mind when you read the sermon title this morning, "Called out by God"? Some of you may read that and think of a divine Umpire looking down and yelling "Yer out!" making a damning call of judgment. Others of you may read that and think of God challenging someone in some way; He's "calling them out." One "calls someone out" by challenging to a duel or a fight ... which is something I first experienced in the 7th grade.

I was a naïve 12-year old from a semi-rural neighborhood entering the regional Stetson Junior High School, and there were some tough kids in that crowd from the less-bucolic districts in the town of West Chester. I had a romantic interest in a particularly attractive young lady named Pat which was reciprocated; unfortunately, Pat had a former boyfriend who didn't like being a former boyfriend ... and he was an EIGHTH grader, and on the wrestling team, and (I think) one of the captains of that wrestling team. To make a long story short, Larry *called me out* ... challenging me to meet him behind Briggs Sporting Goods store 9:30 Saturday morning. I was nonplussed and very unnerved by it all, to say the least. Well, call me chicken, but my mama didn't raise no fool; I didn't show up at Briggs Sporting Goods that Saturday, and the whole thing eventually blew over ... in fact, Larry and I wound up on somewhat friendly terms over the years, teammates in football. That was my first experience with being "called out"; I was challenged to a fight, challenged to take a stand for the "love" I professed for the fair damsel Pat. When you are being called out, you are being called to show up and stand up for your honor, your convictions, and/or to defend a point or an issue. After worship last Sunday, someone approached me and said, "You called me out, so here I am." I scratched my head for a moment, and then remembered I had said during the sermon, "I would venture to say that none of us have heard the audible voice of God, and if so, I'd like to talk with you about it." Well, this person responded ... and proceeded to tell me of an intense spiritual experience he had a few years back where he very distinctly heard a voice that to him was unmistakably the voice of God. Without going into detail, let me just say this man hadn't sought this experience, and it terrified him at first, but this vocal directive prompted him to action in a situation that just seemed divinely inspired. Or, you may remember Elijah *calling out* the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel... in that delightful story from I Kings 18, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest. "Let's set up two altars... with two bulls upon those altars, then let us call on your god and my God and whichever God answers, that's the true God." And you know the story; the prophets of Baal prayed and danced and cut themselves and did all kinds of things to get their "god's" attention, but their altar remained untouched. Toward evening, Elijah walked up (*after having the altar dowsed with gallons of water!*), said a brief prayer, and "WHOOMPH" ... fire came down and consumed the bull, the altar and left a huge crater. God beat Baal.

And then *some* of you may read that sermon title and your first thought was of the original definition of the Greek word our Bibles translate as "Church." If anyone is in that latter group, good for you! You were probably paying attention during an Inquirer's class, as we go over this each time we meet to learn what it means to be part of the "church." The Greek "ekklesia" was the most common word used in the New Testament to designate the worshipping congregation. Literally, the word means "the *called-out* ones." It comes from the root verb "καλεω," kaleo, which means, "to call". It was not a "religious" word; it simply was the common word used to designate any sort of assembly, any group of people "called" together for a common purpose. When Paul writes, "*To the church of God in Corinth*," he is using that word "ekklesia." The word "ekklesia" occurs in 115 places in the New Testament. 113 times it is translated "church;" the remaining 2 times it is translated "assembly." It's an interesting translation, because it isn't an exact, literal translation. The lineage of our English word "church" does not come from the Greek "ekklesia." "Church" goes back to the Scottish "kirk," (*not the captain of the starship Enterprise*), which comes from the Dutch "kerk," which comes from the German "Kirche," which comes from the Greek "kuriachos," which means "those who belong to the 'Κυριος' (Kurios), the Lord." Interestingly, the actual Greek word "kuriachos" from which we derive our English word church appears in the New Testament only twice, and in neither case is it translated "church". It appears once in I Corinthians 11:20 where it refers to "the Lord's supper," and once again in Revelation 1:10 where it refers to "the Lord's day."

But as the theology of this new "ekklesia", this new assembly, matured and jelled, it became clear that the One who had "kaleo-ed," the One who called out this assembly, was the Lord Who called them to be His own. So, both of these words (*ekklesia* and *kuriachos*) come into play when we say the word "Church." The "church" is those who are called out by God to be His own. Whenever we make the assertion, "*I believe in the Holy Catholic Church*" this comes into play. First, the dictionary defines **HOLY** as 1. *Belonging to, derived from, or associated with a divine power; sacred.* 2. *Specified or set apart for a religious purpose.* The church's holiness is derived, not intrinsic; it is holy not because anyone **IN** the church is holy, but because they belong to, are associated with, set apart for (and by) the One Who is holy. The word **CATHOLIC** comes from the Greek *katholikos*, which means *universal*, which means this holy assembly of called-out ones transcends all boundaries of nationality, all boundaries of race, language, and culture, and even all boundaries of time. Finally, the word **CHURCH** refers to all those who "belong to the Lord", those called out by Him to be His people, and called out by Him to stand for, defend and promote all that is good and holy. Properly speaking, the word "church" doesn't refer to a structure or a building or a denomination. The early Puritans referred to the church *building* as the

Meeting House. We don't "go" to church; the "church" goes to the Meeting House; this place where the people of God, the church, meets together, and where the church meets God, in worship. (*Don't worry if old habits die hard, even your pastor tells his children to hurry up every Sunday because we have to get to church on time.*) That group of folks in Corinth became an ekklesia, an assembly called out, gathered, by God, in that city. If Paul were writing to us today, he might say "To God's called out ones gathered at 805 Main Avenue." That is, after all, why we are here. That is the one thing we have in common in all of our many differences. God has called us out, and He has called us here. Most of you make a disciplined choice to be here week after week, sometimes more, to worship and serve God in Christ. But this is about more than our own disciplined choices. Like the Corinthians, we are not simply people who have gathered like some Rotary club or other voluntary association. Something more has taken place; we have been summoned, called, almost subpoenaed to be witnesses to God's glory, love and holiness each and every day, not just Sundays.

Paul continues to address the Corinthian ekklesia, "... to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy..." What does it mean to be sanctified in Christ Jesus? Behind the word "sanctified" lies the Latin "Sanctus" which means "holy," or "set apart." We have been set apart in Christ Jesus. Notice it is not something we have done; it has been done to and for us ... on one hand, it's a done deal! We are the recipients of the work and gifts of Christ Jesus who in calling, naming and claiming us has not only made us His own, but made us holy ... purified, consecrated and, like the servant spoken of in Isaiah, set us apart for God and God's service. This is what the word "holy" means, to be set apart for God. He is the One who makes us holy. It has little if anything to do with our qualities of moral rectitude, superiority or performance. It has everything to do with to Who we belong, Who has called and claimed us. Like the Corinthians, you and I have been set aside for God in Jesus Christ, set apart for holy purposes. Yes, it is a done deal ... but on the other hand, it's a process that takes place. C.S. Lewis, in his book **Mere Christianity**, likened it to an infection that takes over our bodies. CS Lewis calls it God's good infection, an infectious holiness. We have been infused with the presence of Christ himself. You know how that is; more often than not we don't even know an infection has happened until we feel the side effects. The longer your association with the Holy One Who has called you, the more His divine infection spreads and you find yourselves responding, behaving and thinking in ways that display this "infection."

Lewis' infection analogy is one of keen interest in the Clark household right now. Many of you know of my daughter Lydia's struggle with all sorts of inexplicable symptoms including movement disorders, occasional vocal tics, temporary loss of language/ability to speak and/or even walk, all of which have been plaguing her off and on since at least Ash Wednesday last February ... that day we rushed her to the hospital by ambulance fearing a stroke, for (among other things) her entire right side had gone flaccid, she couldn't speak, and facial features all resembled stroke symptoms. To make a long story short, it's been a roller coaster ride through the medical community of Rhode Island with doctors, four different neurologists, psychiatrists ... none of whom gave any clear diagnosis other than the apparently catch all "conversion disorder" because they could find "nothing wrong." Lydia was understandably sick of doctors, but needed to have a physical done for college last August... and lo and behold, a wonderful general practitioner at the Wickford Walk-In started asking her question after question, actually listening to her answers, and it was soon obvious to us he was (a) taking her seriously (a refreshingly new experience) and (b) knew where he was going with his diagnosis. Well, again to make a long story short, he ordered a brain "SPECT" scan (a nuclear imaging test) in December; the scan confirmed there is widespread and entrenched encephalitic infection in Lydia's brain which is consistent with a long term, deeply entrenched infection of Lyme disease. It's possible she could have had it for years. This is a bad infection; however, it is treatable with an intense antibiotic regimen.

So we are sanctified, set apart, called to be holy, infected by the good infection of holiness, which makes us a bit different from the rest of the world around us. One way of expressing this has been to say we are to be "in" but not "of" the world. Be careful, though, with that imagery lest we too quickly see ourselves "above" the world; no one who truly understands grace can ever look down on others. An incarnational theology demands a more dynamic understanding of what it means to be "set apart." The church is called out and set apart by God. The purpose of this assembly exists beyond itself. This is not just a self-help group. Nor is it just a voluntary association gathered around some commonly agreed-to activity or purpose, like rearing children, fostering companionship, working to address hunger, poverty or forms of injustice. We do all these, but they are not our primary purpose. Paul reminds us our primary purpose is to be God's people, called out and set apart in Christ Jesus. Called to be His holy ones, consecrated and set apart for Him here in Warwick, RI, commissioned and empowered by Him to go into the world as His infectious representatives; this is what it means to be the Church, the ekklesia, the called out ones, the Kuriachos, the ones who belong to the Lord.

One last point: "belonging to the Lord" means not only that we are not our own, it also means we are not ON our own. That means two things: First, God is among us. Sometimes that is so obvious we need not speak it. But it is well for us, from time to time, to remind ourselves we are God's people and God is in the midst of us. Second, we are not the only ones to be so called by God. We belong to a larger community that extends beyond this place. Wherever you find people gathering to call on God in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, there you will find an extension of the assembly, there you will find God's holy ones. To all these Paul speaks "... together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Grace and peace to you. You are a bearer of grace -- God's grace -- wherever you go. You are a bearer of peace -- God's peace -- wherever you go. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." We do not go from this place and into the world to be God's people sustained by our own resources. We go empowered by God's Spirit, privileged to be bearers of His grace and peace wherever we go.

That's why God called you out!