

Here I am, For You Called Me

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Though I may speak with bravest fire and have the gift to all inspire
But have not love my words are vain as sounding brass and hopeless gain

A preaching professor once said to me, "You've got to love them." Your flock, she meant. "You've got to love them. If you don't love them and you get up in that pulpit, you're just correcting them." I think about that a lot - I was a frequent guest preacher in seminary, so how to love those congregations to whom I was a stranger? And yet that is the preacher's charge. It's easier here, settled, seeing you nearly every week, getting to know you as a congregation and as individuals. But I think she meant something more than just - hold a fondness in your heart for the church. Something like, the act of loving the church is being in the church and of the church, not just at potlucks but deeply, and spiritually. So when I sit around my study or I get up early and walk and mutter to myself or I sit in coffee shops in the morning on my writing days or I take out my phone in the middle of dinner to write down some sermon idea that comes to me inconveniently, I am searching for the word for us all. When I step into your pulpit, I don't think about what YOU need to hear. I think about what WE need to hear. In the poetry or the hymns or the stories or the texts there is a message of love and liberation for us all, and it is my task, every week, to mine for it. A sermon is, of course, not a sermon until it is delivered - when it is papers on my desk it is a sermon manuscript - the sermon is what happens between the preacher and the people and even, if we're lucky, the spirit, when the congregation is gathered to worship. And so when I step into your pulpit I do not search for the message that will condemn you, or the message that will compliment you, or the message that will make me seem clever - I am searching for the confronting and compelling and challenging and championing message for us all. The post-script to the story I told you last week about my friend who said I had hurt their feelings is that I apologized to them via text, because they texted me, but I hadn't called them on the phone yet. So after I got up in here and told you that story - which I had not planned on telling you, by the way, it was not in the papers, and it was not in the plan and it was not in my google docs, I called that friend and reconnected a little.

And so for us all - when we are in the position to offer guidance or instruction, may we follow it in humility and in love, or else risk sounding brass and hopeless gain.

Though I may give all I possess and striving so my love profess
But be not giv'n by love within the profit soon grows strangely thin

This hymn takes its text from 1 Corinthians in the Christian New Testament. Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is encouraging them to stop showing off. Stop one-upping each other about how much they give, how much they sacrifice, how much they love Jesus. We're taking a different tack on this passage today though. Paul's guidance is about inner love guiding outer actions which gives purpose and meaning to gestures. And that's great.

But I'm thinking about what it means to pursue a calling. Social workers, teachers, public health professionals, clergy - it used to be that you could pursue a vocation and, while you would never be wealthy, you could expect a middle-class living. But that's no longer true.

The cost of education has risen astronomically. More and more people are in debt achieving educations they thought would keep them safe and make them marketable, only to discover that they

Low unemployment rates don't tell us much at all about part-time labor, fair labor, unionized labor, or safe labor. Low unemployment rates don't take into account the instability of that employment, the temporary nature or the seasonal nature, the jobs that keep their employees juuuuust part-time enough that they don't offer benefits.

You should know, by the way, because it's important that justice begins at home - that we as a church offer health benefits and retirement contributions to our 3 part-time staff. And I feel fairly compensated by this church according to our guidelines. But that's just not true across the board in the helping professions.

Schools struggle with funding, redlining ensures that public schools in wealthy neighborhoods are effectively private, some states prevent teachers from unionizing and accessing their collective power, as if they can simply love their work enough to support themselves. As if they can be giv'n by love within so it will not matter if their profit grows strangely thin.

And so love for one's work has been used, powerfully, by a capitalist system to keep workers undercompensated and those at the top reaping more and more profit. If you love your work you'll never work a day in your life - have you heard that? It's nonsense. I wonder if some of you have experienced this manipulation in your own professional lives? Even more painful, I wonder if some of you have believed it, and passed it on to others, sickened by what you used to believe?

This is why teachers across the nation are striking, and some of them are winning. This is why North Carolina teachers in this right-to-work, anti-union state are organizing for the right to unionize and build their collective power. Yes, love can guide your labor, but a passion isn't a substitute for making a living, and should not be.

Come spirit come, our hearts control. Our spirits long to be made whole
Let inward love guide every deed, by this we worship and are freed.

Now, not all of us conflate our purpose on this earth with our professional lives. There is a dangerous overlap for those of us, especially those of us whose work is so closely tied to our passions. But for all of us, regardless of what we do now or did for work, there is an inward love, there is a conviction and a calling, there is a noble purpose for each of us. And the economy, access to the professional class, debt burden, a possible housing bubble, late-stage capitalism and life in a crumbling and terrifying empire make it hard to balance making a living and

pursuing a calling for those of us who are working or still wanting to work.

So when the voice of God calls you in the night, when you feel the tug of the great mystery, when something larger and older and more beautiful and scarier than what you had imagined emerges and calls your name -- what does it say?

Sometimes a calling to a career change, though the vocations that used to provide a middle-class living no longer do.

Sometimes a calling to make some noise, to disrupt the false peace called for by the comfortable moderates.

Sometime a calling to unite us all, not in a strong-armed display of forced or false unity but as a recognition that all struggle is interconnected.

Sometimes we think we choose it - but we know it chooses us. The wand chooses the wizard, as JK Rowling tells us. The skills that present themselves in us ought to be used and offered in service of a better world. And we don't always know when it's coming. Sometimes we have such a careful plan for our lives. I did. I was going to be a high school English teacher and a cross country coach. But to be too devoted to the plan is to deny the mystery. So what is it that is calling you, and what does it call you to do? Maybe it's your work and maybe it's not, but that's a little beside the point.

Because The universe buries strange jewels
Deep within us all,
And then stands back to see if we can find them.

So, church, I say this with all confidence -
Something wonderful is buried inside each of us.
Let us help each other discover it. Amen.