

Known, Claimed, and Called

A sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman
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This past Thursday morning sometime between 8 and 9am – I met Myles for the first time. Myles Seth Hendler Voss came into this world about 4:30 that morning – so he was about 4 hours old at the time of my visit. Beautiful child with black hair and blond eye brows. I looked into Myles beautiful face and pondered the Mystery that is God. Pondered the Mystery of a child, a new life, the Mystery that has set the forces into motion that makes life possible. I marveled at these things – and thought of the text from the start of John’s gospel – In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh. And here before me was a living expression of the Word, in a child named Myles.

Then I thought about today’s text – this calling text for the young Jeremiah. And the affirmation – before I formed you I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you, and I appointed you, I called you, to be a prophet. I looked at Myles and knew that from the very start he is loved. He is known, and claimed and called. Maybe not to be a prophet – but to live life to its fullest. And that all of us are. That God is with us in some way that we cannot fully know – but that is the promise and the gift we receive – we are not alone, we are gifted and blessed and loved, and we have what we need to live our lives.

I imagine that Myles will resist being known, and claimed and called at times. We all do. He will say as each of us has said at some point or another – you don’t know me. You don’t understand me. You don’t know what is best for me. We better pray for Seth and Amanda – they don’t know what they’ve gotten themselves into. But we all have to make this challenge as we grow up. It is part of the process of being human. And it continues for our whole lives.

I know a man, a United Methodist minister whose calling is to tell about God’s love through music – his name is Ed Kilbourne, and he travels around the Southeast mostly playing his guitar, singing, and telling stories in churches. It’s been a number of years ago since I’ve seen Ed – but I remember in one of his concerts at a church I was serving in Charlotte, between two songs, he started talking about his own child. How he marveled at the beauty of his child – the little hands and toes, the small nose. How beautiful and wonderful – and then he realized - O my gosh – this beautiful little child is going to grow to be a teenager. And then this marvelous, wonderful, beautiful human being will challenge everything I say, will buck the boundaries that we have set for him, will resist our authority as he takes on and tries to discover his own authority. Because that is the work of teenagers. That is their calling at that time in life. To find themselves. To find their lives so they can pursue them fully. And while it is the right thing for them to be doing, it can be hard for the rest of us to live with. You know what I am talking about.

When I was a teenager, struggling with my own image of self and my value as a person, thinking I had nothing to offer anybody – often spending hours in my room playing my guitar and singing – wondering if I would ever make it to be an adult – I would remember some of the stories in the Bible – because for me, I loved those stories. I wanted to know them all. Because I wanted God to call me. I wanted my life to be worth something. So I wondered – do you call me God like you called Jeremiah? Can you use my life to make a difference in the world.

Our youth group would sing each Sunday night at the start of our meetings – and one song we sang was this – I haven't heard it sung in a long time – don't know if people are still singing it or not – but it helped me:

*I am loved, I am loved, I can risk loving you
For the One who knows my best loves me most.
I am loved, and you are loved,
Won't you please take my hand?
We are free to love each other for we are loved.*

Being known and loved is what got me through several hard years as a teenager. For I felt like such a misfit. I felt so lost. But I had great adult friends and guides to mentor me. I knew I could trust them to help me find my way. And I did. They had claimed me. They had told me over and over – you are somebody. You count for something. We need you. You make a difference. Their claim on me helped shape my understanding of myself.

And they called me. They called me to take my faith seriously, and to use my gifts to share God's love to others. To work for the common good. To be an active participant in God's ongoing work in the world. Not to be a passive bystander. They taught me the meaning of faith and the importance of community.

I am here to tell you – there is power in being known, claimed, and called.

Now I think our church is a lot like a teenager right now. Even though we are 93 years old as a congregation, we have had a transformation in the past 10-12 years. And we have grown and changed. And we are in a time when we are challenging each other – and saying – you don't know me. You see, we came together initially and fell in love. We found a church that would let us be ourselves. We found a church that was somehow different from other churches we had been to. We found a church that was small enough to know us personally and well, a church that had a vision for justice, that took worship seriously, that offered a strong and progressive educational program. We believed that we could come out of whatever closet we were in and be ourselves here. We could talk about Christian faith in a way that not many other churches in our community did. Or at least that is how some of you have talked about this church.

And we took on some challenges. We talked through our differences. Remember when I thought I was all powerful – and I took the American flag out of the sanctuary and hid it. Someone had once told me – just do that and don't ask permission. So I did. One of the

most foolish things I ever did. And it took a while for some of you to notice, but finally you confronted me and asked where the flag was – and I confessed. At first you wouldn't believe me – didn't think I would do something like that. But finally you heard me. And we talked about the issue of the flag being in the sanctuary. We learned that we could talk about such things. We could be honest and share our hearts and our struggles and our hopes. And our love for each other grew deeper. And we also got a taste of how differently we thought and believed.

We went through the process of being Open and Affirming. Of saying together we are a church that invites people of every race, nationality, age, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, ability, financial means, ethnic and spiritual background into the full life and ministry of this congregation. It is a great statement – and we got to the statement only after we had spent a year learning together, telling our stories to each other, being vulnerable with each other. And even though a few people left when we became open and affirming, our community grew stronger.

But being inviting is not the same as knowing how to live with all the diversity. Our open hearts did not always match up with open minds. We struggled to understand each other – not so much around issues of sexuality – which is where the open and affirming process seemed to focus most – but just in terms of differences. We had different understandings of what it means to be church and to be Christian. We had different opinions on how to finance a new building – how much financial risk to take on. We had different ideas on what kind of building we needed. We did all agree, however, that the building needed a lot more toilets than we had on Merrimon Avenue. We talked and talked – we went through lots of process – and we made decisions together. We didn't all agree. But we hung in there together.

And that has been our gift. To hang in there together. But at times it is more difficult. And we have felt some of that tension as of late. We have this wonderful old building in the heart of the public arena now – but we haven't sold the land and we are anxious about paying the mortgage. And we are aware that being church doesn't always feel good. We are not only like a teenager that is challenging who we are, we are like a relationship in which the romance has faded some, the honeymoon is ended, and we are waking up to the reality that love is not a feeling but a commitment.

We don't feel as close as a community as we once did. Part of that is probably because of the building – it is larger, and the sanctuary is more formal. So we don't feel as closely connected. And this pulpit is further away. I have been trying to figure out how to preach from up here – I feel far away from you. And our structure of organization is going through a change. I can't make it to all the meetings and events anymore. There is not enough of me to go around. I find that to be very difficult – because I have always loved being there with you. But I have to do my job different, and that feels different on both ends to you and me – and we are growing up together trying to figure out who we are, what our gifts are, and who we want to be when we grow up.

Now, I believe we have gotten to where we are by being faithful. By being known, claimed, and called – we have made decisions the very best we knew how to make them together – while trying to understand how to be the church that we are. It is a challenge. And even though we are not the first church to go through these growing pains, no one else can do this for us. Just like every teenager has to find her or his own way, we too must find our own way as a congregation. These are our growing pains. We can learn from the experience of others and the research that has been done, but in the end, we have to find our own way. And we keep complaining – God, we don't know how to do this. And that is part of the process too. And we complain to those around us – why are we doing this? Why are we singing this song in worship? Why is so and so doing that? And all of us are saying somewhere deep inside- you just don't understand me. You don't know me.

But don't forget what we do know. Don't forget the challenges we have faced. Don't forget that we are children of the God of the Great Wandering People. Don't forget how Moses said: It sure is hard to take a crowd and turn them into a community.

I called a pastoral conversation a few weeks back – and about 60 of us came – and we began to talk about how things are feeling. And I hope we remembered that we can do this. That we can talk about whatever we need to talk about. I like an image that William Sloane Coffin used in a sermon he preached not long after the attacks of September 11. This sermon came after President Bush had decided to respond with military attacks in Afghanistan, a decision that Coffin disagreed with. He said – As Americans we have to remember that discussion, debate, and dissension are hallmarks of our democracy, and as Christians we're called on to engage in a lover's quarrel – not a grudge fight, but a lover's quarrel - with our country, a reflection of God's eternal lovers' quarrel with the entire world.

I like that notion of a lover's quarrel. Being Christian has already been found to be extremely difficult. By adding diversity into the dynamic, it is even more difficult at times. We are looking for a common language, a common song, a common thread – we have talked about finding the theology that holds all our different theologies together – and it is work to get there. We keep taking steps towards that – and we are making progress. But it is always work. And it takes time. And we have to resist the temptation to react to the struggle and challenge by becoming dogmatic and certain. Or by taking the easy answer. Rather, we have to remember – we are known, we are claimed, we are called – and we are not alone. God is with us. And we have each other too. And we have not come this far to falter and fail.

I love this congregation – even with all our differences. I love that some of you feel called to provoke the rest of us. I love that some of you are great at being courageous. Some of you call us to be financially responsible – while others say – we have to take some risks in order to take on God's vision. We have many gifts – and all of them are needed. We also have the gift of conflict – and some day we will learn better how to let conflict be a gift. We will get there.

On Thursday I looked into the face of Myles and marveled at the Mystery of life. Today I look at you and marvel at the beauty of us – diverse but creative and wonderful and full of challenge. And all I know to say is – God, thank you for the mystery of our lives. Thank you for knowing us. thank you for claiming us. Thank you for calling us. Now, stay with us as we continue to find our way.

Amen!