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“Whose Call Is It?”

Mark 7:1-16

Key verse: Mark 7:5 “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders?”

Emory Presbyterian Church

Atlanta, Georgia

Sunday, September 3, 2006

Please join me in a PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Strong, loving God of work and play, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, this day, and all our days.

PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION: I am honored to worship with you this day, praising God for abundant blessings and seeking with you to hear what God is saying about how God would have each of us engage in our particular calls to ministry, honoring the individual gifts God has generously given to each of us.

I especially appreciate the invitation from your warm and earnest pastor, Jill Oglesby Evans, to present a message today while she and so many members and friends of Emory Presbyterian Church are retreating at Calvin Center for an annual joy-filled weekend of rest, play, renewal and worship.

Among the “Retreaters” is a contingent from the Emory University Presbyterian Campus Ministry group. I am the chair of the Board of Directors of the campus ministry group this year and wish to thank this church and each of you, for your support of this important ministry. You have not only welcomed the students to worship with you, you have invited them to be a part of this church family and make Emory their church home. Let me tell you, they are responding enthusiastically.

In addition to your welcoming presence, you provide office space for the Campus Minister, Rob McClellan, who is a senior at Columbia Seminary. You also have supplied two core members of the board of directors from among your Session – Ann Morris and Mike Reeves. Please continue to support them and us with your prayers and your openness. We are excited about the potential for real growth in campus ministry membership this year and more importantly for growth in discipleship. You do a lot; and we are very grateful.

In addition to being associated with Campus Ministry, I am also a candidate for the ordained Ministry of Word and Sacrament under the care of the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley in Birmingham, Alabama where the General Assembly was just held. I grew up Presbyterian and was both baptized and confirmed at age 12 in White Bluff Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Ga. Although I felt the Spirit very strongly that day, it was only three years ago that I responded to that long-simmering “quiet call,” left my position as a fundraiser for a major academic medical center and entered seminary. I just graduated in May from the Candler School of Theology at Emory. Earlier this

week I turned in my last ordination examination and started a year-long residency as a chaplain at Scottish Rite Children's Hospital here in Atlanta.

When I was at Scottish Rite earlier this year as an intern, God was very present to me on that sacred ground and I found that I was witnessed to as much as I witnessed to others about God's steadfast love. Even amidst the pain, suffering, and agony of new diagnoses, old debilitating congenital conditions, traumatic emergencies, and the precariousness of life for premature babies whose weight gain is measured in grams instead of pounds, God was clearly there.

Further, I discovered that the hospital was a vibrant community comprised not only of the patients, their families and caregivers but the community also included a vast variety of support staff. In addition to the doctors and nurses there were technicians, dieticians, social workers, child life specialists, housekeepers, and even knowledgeable administrators – each equipped with their own gifts and graces for special service to God in the care of children in need. Emory Church, too, is a vibrant community -- graced with a wide array of gifted individuals.

In selecting the text and title for today's message, I had a choice. I'll admit I was tempted to write a sermon based on the luscious Song of Solomon lectionary reading for today: "my beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag." I thought the college visitors, at least, would enjoy the imagery. Or the wonderful text from James which you heard read earlier: "every generous act of giving is from above..." but I thought Jill might use that later for a sermon on stewardship.

So, while reading and re-reading the Sunday lectionary Scriptures, the gospel lesson kept resonating with me. "Heads or Tails?" Which Bible reading to chose? It was my call. Or was it?

In today's gospel lesson from Mark, Jesus is around the Sea of Galilee teaching, feeding thousands on just a few loaves of bread and a few dead fishes, and healing the sick. He's obviously attracted quite a following as the passage reports, because even the Pharisees and scribes from JERUSALEM have shown up. Now friends, Jerusalem is over 100 miles away from where he was at the time.

The Pharisees were Jewish reformers who promoted ritualistic piety for all Jews, not just for the Jewish priesthood. The Pharisees wanted everybody to following the traditional "rules" that had developed over time. The rituals had become the most important thing. This handwashing ritual referred to in Mark's gospel was more than an effort to promote hygiene, it wasn't just killing germs, it was more like requiring the Hokey-Pokey before you ate. Sadly, the Pharisees had gotten away from the interior heart of piety – away from reverence accompanying godliness and instead they simply emphasized the external practices, the religious "obligations."

Jesus did not oblige his disciples to live "according to the tradition of the elders" because he rightfully obliged them instead to return to the heart of God, to live

according to God's commandments. The commandments tell us how we are to worship God and how we should care and respect each other. Jesus criticized the Pharisees because what was coming out of their mouths and their hearts was not consistent with God's word. He quotes both the Isaiah prophesy about hypocrites, and he quotes from the 10 Commandments in Exodus! Honor your father and mother...

Now I don't know how many students attend Emory because it's a family tradition. Or how many of you followed, professionally, in your "family's business" – commercial enterprises, the practices of law, medicine, theology or music, business accounting, social work, sales, education. Or who among you have, or are, making homes, providing care for dependents, volunteering long hours in the church and the community along with work, or in "active" retirement. Was it your call, your decision, to go in those directions? Was your decision an independent one, or were you listening to outside voices? Were you simply expected to be an...aeronautical engineer because your mother was? What was, or IS your heart telling you to do? And more importantly...WHO is in your heart?

If what I read is true. **If** the covenant of Emory Presbyterian Church is an accurate reflection of what's in your heart and is what you practice, I am impressed. Further, I would not expect the frankly quite heated, righteous indignation of Jesus that he showed to the Pharisees, to be directed to anyone here. The covenant in your bulletin reads: IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S LOVE AND FORGIVENESS WE PLEDGE TO INSPIRE EACH OTHER TO PRAYER, STUDY AND STEWARDSHIP. TO CULTIVATE AN OPEN, CARING CHURCH, WHERE DIVERSE GIFTS ARE DISCOVERED, RESPECTED, AND EMPLOYED; TO MINISTER FAITHFULLY TO THE POOR, LONELY, SICK, AND THOSE IN NEED; TO REACH OUT, SHARING OUR FAITH, INVITING AND WELCOMING OTHERS INTO OUR FELLOWSHIP; AND TO SEEK JUSTICE AND HEALING IN THE CHURCH, COMMUNITY AND WORLD. Your monthly newsletter suggests you are doing much of what you "preach." I've read about Safe Haven, mission trips to Africa and Belize, hospitality for a new Kenyan fellowship; welcome baskets for campus ministry. And yet I urge you to pray; to engage in transformative prayer – to listen for how God's specific call to you may be changing and may be changing your life by inviting and allowing you to grow even closer to God.

Yesterday afternoon, I was listening to the Georgia game on the radio. I wanted to hear, again, the gravely voice of the Georgia Bulldogs, Larry Munson, who has been broadcasting the games for decades. Saturdays in the fall and football – it's a tradition, right? Well, maybe not at Emory University. I even listened to the post-game show a little bit and heard Coach Richt preach a part of this sermon. He'd been asked about the line-up – the depth chart – who would "start" in certain positions, who would be first string, second string and on down the line. He lamented, "It was a tough call..."

The preacher, novelist and essayist, Frederick Buechner, offers this rich description of call: "Vocation comes from the Latin *vocare*, "to call," and it means the work one is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to do all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God, rather

than that of society, or the superego, or self-interest. By and large, a good rule for finding this out is the following: the kind of work God usually calls you to do is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world needs most to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a) but if your work is writing deodorant commercials, the chances may be that you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you've probably met requirement (b) but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by your work, the chances are you've not only bypassed (a) but you probably aren't helping your patients much, either." Then Buechner says -- "Neither the hair shirt nor the soft birth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

Friends, know that God is faithful and will equip you to find that place – your call is God's call. It's between you and God. It's a call and a response – requiring interior work in your heart. As Buechner reminds us, the hungry world needs your glad response. And as you establish the rhythm of your good, heart work, remember to do what the Creator did. Rest. Take a Sabbath – and in so doing honor God and love yourself as you love your neighbor.

Thanks be to God. May it ever be so.