

December 22, 2013 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Romans 1:1-7

TITLE: Called to Belong

Earlier this year, the American actor John Lithgow had the opportunity to star in a comedy staged by the National Theatre in London. On the back of the insert in your bulletin is a picture of Lithgow as well as the theater complex. Lithgow wrote an article about his experiences there.¹ He noted that in London, opening night of a show is called its “Press Night.” And when the stage manager announces through the dressing room speakers that the actors should get ready, he doesn’t say “Places everyone”; he says “Beginners to the stage, please.”

The National Theatre is a big complex, housing three different theaters that are used year-round. Each of the three theaters works through a repertory of three plays, so at any given moment, up to nine plays are rehearsing or performing within its walls. There are 30 dressing rooms, some for up to five people, others intended for individual stars. They are arranged around an interior air shaft, five stories high, at the center of the theater complex. All the dressing room windows face in on one another. Glance out the window a half-hour before your call time and you’ll see dozens of other actors all getting ready for one of the three shows about to begin. Lithgow described how the actors wave to one another or open their windows and chat across the air shaft. But as soon as showtime approaches, everyone gets down to business – donning their wigs, making up their faces, squeezing into their costumes. And on that magical evening when the actors are called to their places on opening night, or rather, as the beginners are called to the stage on Press Night, a wonderful tradition takes place at the National Theatre – about which I’ll tell you in a moment.

Earlier you heard the opening of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. We assume that Paul had never been to Rome before, so he used the salutations part of his letter to make connections with the Jews and non-Jews who made up the Christian church in that capital city. And he has to do this quickly, because if you’ve ever had the task of reading a pile of job résumés or grant proposal letters, you know how little you have to read before you’ve made up your mind about the applicant. Paul begins with three self-descriptions, naming himself a “servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.” A servant – an apostle set apart from normal roles in life to live out the good news of God in Christ. So far, so good.

Then Paul focuses his attention on the two groups to whom he is writing – the Jews and the Roman Gentiles, non-Jews. Paul talks about how Jesus the Messiah was foretold by the Old Testament prophets and descended from David according to the flesh – a fully human figure of the Jewish people. Yet this same Jesus was declared Son of God and resurrected from the dead by the spirit – flesh and spirit, fully human and fully divine, good news for both the Jews and Gentiles.

Here in the first generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Christian gospel is coming together. Jesus lived, died, and was raised to new life. And Jesus came for all people. This was the message of Paul and the early church that has been passed on to us.

Now this was a revolutionary message. We've gotten so used to this language about Jesus that it doesn't strike us as exceptional anymore. But Paul is writing revolutionary, political words. The Christians were a tiny minority, huddled together in the shadow of the mighty Roman Empire, a brutal, military juggernaut that controlled much of the known world and that soon would begin persecuting this upstart religious group. When a new emperor sat on the throne of Rome, his ascension was proclaimed as "euangelion", "gospel good news", the same word Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul would use about the "euangelion," gospel about Jesus Christ. And when titles for the emperor of Rome were listed off, routinely he was called "son of god." But now these Christians proclaimed that there is only one God and King, and Jesus Christ is Lord, the true Son of God.

Two different worldviews clashed in the opening words of Paul's letter – Roman culture vs. Christian culture. But rather than issuing a manifesto of war, Paul writes a letter of invitation. And the most powerful words he uses are captured in the little verb "to be called." He himself was called to be an apostle. The church, God's beloved in Rome, he describes as those "called to be saints." And the gospel message about obedient faith is one intended for Jew and Gentile alike, ancient Roman, modern Pittsburgher alike – for all are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

You and I are called to belong. We're invited, yes; encouraged, yes; but stronger than that. Called – compelled – moved – empowered to be part of this larger message of God's grace and justice and love that doesn't put up walls to divide, but instead breaks down barriers so that life can be lived abundantly, joyfully, faithfully. So, to help you picture what it looks like to be "called to belong," let's go back to John Lithgow in his dressing room in the National Theatre in London.

On the night that a play is first opening, its "Press Night," no special announcement is made over the public address system; but every actor knows that for about a third of the people in the dressing rooms, tonight is a very big night. At soon as the stage manager announces, "Beginners to the stage, please," all the actors in all the dressing rooms walk to their windows and, with open palms and in full view of everyone else, begin to drum on the glass. Lithgow described the sound as being like the stampede of a thousand wildebeests; and that to him it was a glorious moment and the most beautiful tribute from one set of actors to another that he had ever been part of. He described it as being like the thunderous heartbeat of the entire theater itself. And when it was time for Press Night for Lithgow's own show, he stood at his window, banged on the glass with all his colleagues, and burst into tears.

We are called to belong. It was true for Paul and the early church in Rome. It is true for each one of us, this congregation in Pittsburgh, and people of faith the world over. We open our eyes each morning into a world we did not create and which we certainly do not sustain – a God-given, wonderful world in which we hear the invitation spoken to us, “Wake up. Beginners to the stage, please.” We can close our curtains in our private dressing rooms and think nothing about the larger drama of which we are a part. Or we can move to the windows, look across the open spaces and see the faces in the other dramas unfolding around us. We can listen as they bang their hands on the glass and smile at us. We can do the same ourselves, belonging to this great cloud of witnesses, these sinners of God’s redeeming, these saints of the gospel of Christ.

That may seem hard to do in today’s fractious world. I am well aware of the other announcements that come through the PA systems of our lives, the news media reports of today’s world. Whether you get your information from the Post-Gazette or Jon Stewart, Facebook or Fox Radio, you know the stories we daily hear. Politics, fracking, Obamacare, NSA surveillance, the theft of credit card data, Phil Robertson’s firing from “Duck Dynasty,” Frank Schaefer being defrocked by the Methodist Church after officiating at his gay son’s marriage. When people raise these topics, argue over these current events, Paul doesn’t call us to jump into the fray, fists swinging. Paul doesn’t sound the trumpet to rally the troops for counter-offensives in the culture wars. Paul writes, “Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus.” Paul encourages us to listen deeply – to listen compassionately. That does not mean we are to condone words that are violent, racist, or homophobic; nor are we to wish ill of those of different opinions, different orientations, ethnicities, or religions. But we are to look for where they are hurting, where they are afraid, where they feel excluded or forgotten or alone. And then we are to call them to the window to see the diverse faces of those on the stage of God’s drama of life, and to stand beside them, as we hear the sound of hands banging for them and us. For in Christ, we are called to belong, to be together.

This can be hard work. It at times requires both confrontation and patience, speaking the prophetic truth but doing so out of love. Being called by Christ makes demands of us; and when that call comes to us, we must stand and respond by faith. Today we only heard the first lines of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome. There are many more verses and chapters that follow that introduction. Responding to the call of faith is a life’s journey. But to reject it is to miss out on the deepest, truest expression of who we are meant to be. That sad option means we step off the stage, we fail to play our part. Let Paul’s introductory words ring in your ears as a blessing each and every day: “You who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, called to be saints: Grace to you, all of you, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Beginners to the stage, please.

AMEN

¹ John Lithgow, "A Lone Yank Takes Joy in Togetherness", *New York Times*, January 13, 2013.