

God's Design for You

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: I'm willing to bet that just about everyone here had once upon a time, a parent, grandparent, or other mentor who taught you the valuable lesson: "Always use the right tool for the job". There are at least two reasons for this. The first is that it saves a lot of work. A fellow might think that a shovel is just a shovel, but he'd soon change his mind if he tried to use the same one to dig postholes that he used to scoop snow. There's a reason they sell a dozen different kinds of shovels at the hardware store: it's *efficiency*. The other reason to match the right tool to the job is out of respect for the tool itself. Some tools are painstakingly engineered by master craftsmen to precisely controlled specifications. They're more than tools; they are works of art. I just about come unglued when I see someone take a high quality chef's knife and use it as a screwdriver – or worse, for prying open a stuck drawer. Such an abuse makes me want to grab it away from them: "*Give me that!* This is not a wrecking bar. Nor is it the 'jaws of life'! It's a *knife*. It's for cutting vegetables and *meat* – and if I ever see you do that again, I'll show you how it works."

One of my pet peeves ... can you tell? Anyway, as I was saying, we all understand that tools are created for a purpose. They're designed with the characteristics and features that will enable them to perform specific tasks, and they work best when fulfilling the purpose for which they were made. In a similar way, the Scriptures inform us that the Lord God has created each of us for a specific purpose – or it might be safer to say for a number of purposes since we are all quite a bit more complicated and multidimensional than a simple "one use" tool.

And I cannot stress enough just how much individual care and concern went into God's design for you personally. Today's Old Testament lesson gives us a glimpse into the mind of God in that respect. Though the Lord is speaking to the prophet Jeremiah, it's quite clear that through him, in a more general sense, he is speaking to all of us when he says, "*Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.*" That is a staggering idea, because when God says he *knows* you before your formation, he doesn't just mean "knows *about*" you, sort of forecasting what you will be when you come into existence; no, he means *knows* you in a very close, personal, present, and ongoing sense. Think about that: before you were a gleam in someone's eye – no, even before the Lord called Creation into existence – he had a personal relationship with you. True, you were too young or nonexistent to remember that – the point, however, is that God wasn't.

And speaking of this relationship he had with you, he goes on to say that, "*Before you were brought forth, I consecrated you.*" That idea goes well beyond just knowing you. The word that's translated here as *consecrated* means "set apart". It's the same word we usually translate "sanctify" or "make holy". It means that before you existed the Lord determined to make you something special for himself; that he selected you from the larger pool of humanity and set you aside for his exclusive use. When I was in college, I worked a couple of summers for an outfit that placed concrete: foundations, sidewalks, driveways, that sort of thing. We had three different company vehicles that were loaded down with tools and all the stuff needed to make forms. And all these tools belonged to the company. Anyone on the crew could use them freely to get the job done – except for certain tools. These were marked by the boss as his own. They were mixed in with all the rest, but you weren't allowed to use them. You weren't even to touch them – unless, as he often did, the boss hollered at you to bring him a certain kind of tool that he needed. When that happened, if you knew what was good for you, you dug around until

you found the whatever-it-was he wanted with his mark. That's the idea going on in the text. We are to the Lord sort like my boss's marked tools: mixed in with all the others, and yet, treasured personal possessions. And the funny thing was that for the most part the tools the boss was so attached to weren't necessarily the best or newest ones. In fact, some of them were downright ratty and worn; but they *felt* right in his hand. And because he was very good at what he did, even with the ones you'd be tempted to throw away he could always get a lot more done than anyone else on the crew, and he could do it a lot better. And that too is part of what the Lord is saying to us when he says, "I set you apart."

And then the Lord says to Jeremiah, "*I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.*" And here we have the idea of *specific* purpose. The Lord had in mind a particular mission for Jeremiah: to go and proclaim a definite message to a certain group of people. And we know that he did it – that's why we have the book of Jeremiah the prophet today. Now, using my own limited powers of prophecy, I'm able to say quite confidently that the Lord is not going to appoint any of us to write another book of the Bible. He's already completed that job. But with absolutely the same confidence I can say that the Lord *has* appointed you for any number of other missions. And what's more, there is no one else in the whole world who is as uniquely qualified, equipped, and positioned as you are to do the mission the Lord has appointed for you. You have a crucial role to play in the unfolding of God's great plan – just like Jeremiah did. The only difference is the specific role you've been designed to perform.

Now for his part, Jeremiah was more than a little intimidated when he discovered that his life had cosmic significance in the Lord's grand plan for all things. After all, he was just a kid; now he was being told that he was going to be a key player, following in the line of the really great men of God – men like Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah. To Jeremiah these others seemed superhuman – they were *holy* people, *extraordinary* people – not at all like him. Why, he was just a "normal" guy. It was so much easier for him when he thought of his life as having no particular importance. Then it didn't matter so much what he did or didn't do. But (and it's vital that we understand this) there is no such thing as someone whom the Lord knows, sets apart, and appoints for a task whose life has no particular importance. Besides, Moses, Elijah, and Isaiah were just "normal" people too. What made them holy and extraordinary was the Lord's doing; it was his setting apart and appointing them for his mission. And it was the Lord's powerful presence in their lives that gave them the faith and abilities to fulfill his purposes. Jeremiah was afraid and intimidated with the mission God gave him because he was thinking only of his own frail and sin tainted abilities. "I can't be a prophet; I wouldn't know what to say." He knew he couldn't do on his own what the Lord asked. And because of it, he tried to push the assignment away.

But the Lord told him to stop arguing. "You have nothing to fear because I am going to be with you in this all the way." Jeremiah didn't yet understand that he was the tool that would be operating in the Lord's hand. So, to ensure him of it, the Lord did something truly remarkable: he reached out his hand and touched Jeremiah on the lips – the part of him that the Lord needed to do the job. Then he said, "See, now I have put my words in your mouth." And there are a couple of very important things going on here. First, as I've already indicated, we see the Lord giving his own empowering strength to the very part of Jeremiah the Lord intends to use. He's telling Jeremiah, "I'll be using your mouth now." But secondly, whenever the holy God comes into contact with sinful man, if the man is going to survive the experience, there must be forgiveness. And a consistent biblical theme is that the Lord heals and forgives with a touch. You have only to think of the ministry of Jesus: how often he cured people by the touch of his hand. Similarly, the Lord removes sin with a touch – because in that touch, he ensures the person that he has taken the guilt of the sin upon himself.

The Lord intended to use Jeremiah as his prophet. He created him, set him apart, and appointed him for that purpose. And when the time came, he took him in his hands, ensured him of his presence, forgiveness, and love, and he set him to work to speak his word. And the Lord told Jeremiah that the words he placed in his mouth had power. They had the power to uproot and destroy kingdoms, and also to plant and build them. And so they have. God's judgments upon the nations that Jeremiah prophesied against have all been fulfilled. Even today, the prophet's inspired words of God's law and judgment against the wicked continue to wage war on Satan's dominion by attacking and tearing down the sin nature in all of us – just as his words of God's grace and love are still planting and building up the kingdom of God in and among us. So (and here's my point) God accomplished through Jeremiah the mission he designed him for. And though the prophet has long since entered into his rest, the work the Lord performed through him is still active and making its impact felt today.

And part of its impact is on you, this morning, right now. As you consider the story of the call and commissioning of Jeremiah – where we discover how it was all a part of the Lord's great design – how the Lord knew him from before his formation, set him apart in his love and care, and then appointed him to carry out a specific mission – you cannot help but think of the Lord's design for your own life. You too were known, set apart, and appointed by the Lord. So surely you've asked yourself by now, "What's my part? Where do I fit into God's great plan? What does he want me to do?"

Well, let me ask you this: how would you know? People bring the question to me sometimes, "Pastor, I'm trying to figure out what the Lord wants me to do. Can you help me?" I fear that very often when people ask such things that they're waiting for some kind of burning bush experience like when the Word of the Lord came to Moses saying, "Moses, here's what I want you to do." Or again, as we heard this morning, when the Lord called Jeremiah to be a prophet. In these cases there was a visible appearance of the Lord who spoke directly to the individual. Some people are waiting for something similar to happen to them. But something to remember is that prior to his audience with the Lord, Moses did not have God's Word. A personal audience was necessary for God to communicate with him. Even Jeremiah had only a partial disclosure of God's Word – that's why the Lord called him and others like him to speak for him and write down his Words. And now, because they did what God designed, we no longer need a special appearance of the Lord or an angel to reveal his plan for us. No, we find God's mission for us already written down in the Scriptures.

In fact, a great place to look is today's Epistle lesson. In the passage that comes immediately before it, St. Paul is telling the Christians at Corinth that the Lord has designed each of us to be a functioning part of the kingdom of God, which he calls the body of Christ; and each one is to play his or her own interdependent, divinely designed role just like the individual parts of a human body do. He emphasizes that a body needs all of its parts, and all of them doing their own jobs and working together in harmony for the body to be healthy. Now, the trouble at the Corinthian congregation was that those who were eager to serve were competing for what they thought of as the glitzy, high profile positions. They wanted to be the prophets, apostles, miracle workers, and healers – even though throughout the history of the church the Lord has actually appointed very few to do those tasks. What they didn't want to do were the less glamorous tasks of support, service, maintenance, and administration. And though they are not mentioned, I'll bet it's safe to say that there were also, like in most congregations, folks who were not at all eager to serve. Like Jeremiah before his call, they would prefer to sit things out and say, "Who, me? Oh no, I could never do that."

Paul addresses both ends of the spectrum when he gives the solution. The Christian person, he says, has been designed by God to love. Every Christian has been set apart by God's love in Christ and appointed to show forth God's love in Christ. So no matter what gifts or talents you have, if they are applied without love, they are nothing. Whatever apparent wonders you do, if it's without love, it's meaningless.

Love is the key to fulfilling God's design for you. And Paul goes on to explain what love is: patient, kind, not boastful, rude, or self-seeking. It keeps no record of wrongs. It always protects, hopes, trusts, and perseveres. We're all familiar with the passage and its description of love. The point is that if you do that, truly love, you will be doing what God designed you to do. That's because a person who loves gives himself in service to others, utilizing all the talents and abilities God has supplied as a matter of course. Love means maximum efficiency because you give yourself totally. What gets in the way of us doing what we were designed to do is our old sinful natures. That's the part that holds back because it's afraid to love. It tells us you have to look out for number one, you have to climb to the top, you have to protect yourself. Other times it says, hold back because they want too much from you, don't volunteer, don't show your abilities, don't ask what needs to be done, pretend that you don't see or that you're too busy.

It's fear that stops us from loving; but perfect love casts out fear – and God's love for us is perfect. When Jeremiah was afraid to do what the Lord asked, God touched him, forgiving his sin and giving him divine strength to do what he asked. And the Lord has done the same for us. That's what happened to you in Baptism. Through the medium of water, God touched you, thereby ensuring you that Christ's sacrifice for sin applied to you. There he showed you that he had set you apart for his purposes. He marked you with the cross of Christ as one of the boss's tools, as it were. And ever since, by his Word and Spirit, he's placed you in his hands and directed your course, instructing you in the way of his love. But of course the analogy of tools in the master craftsman's hands breaks down because tools do not have minds of their own like we do. We are not merely pawns waiting to be moved on a cosmic chessboard. We can be willing participants in God's great design, or we can set ourselves at odds with his purposes – and the fearful sin nature in us is always pulling us in that direction: to take these wonderful tools designed for the noble purpose of love, and use them for unworthy, improper, or degrading purposes. Fear still gets in the way. Which is why it's an ongoing struggle to keep loving as we were designed to, and it's why we always fall short of the master's specifications.

But that's also why the Lord provided you a way to keep touching you. He does it in Holy Communion. There he shows you his love in the sacrifice of his Son for you – and there too he touches you on that part he wants to employ for his purposes. No, not just your mouth: by ingesting the Lord's touch, it becomes a part of your whole body. You take in the body and blood of the Lord sacrificed to death for you so that you can present your whole self a living sacrifice of love to God and his design for your life.

Love is God's design for you. That's with what he set you apart, and that's what he appointed you to do. May we then always place ourselves in his hands, that by his forgiving touch, his Word, and his Spirit, we can fulfill the work he designed us to do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!