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13 Pentecost, Proper 16  
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First of all let me say how delighted I am to be with you this morning. Ever since my return to the west coast and the Church Divinity School of the Pacific (CDSP) over 5 years ago, Harriet has been trying to entice me to come to Morro Bay. Now having been here for 2 days, I am kicking myself for not having come sooner.

Although Harriet and I were not in seminary together our lives have intersected in a variety of ways, thanks to CDSP. I can honestly say for both of us our lives were significantly transformed because of our time in seminary. For us it was at a time when the process of seminary and the ordination of women were still new to the church, and we had very few role models who had gone before us.

Now 36 years after I first set foot on the campus in Berkeley I watch other students arrive, and although the church has changed with many women in ordained roles in the church including your own rector and bishop and the Presiding Bishop who also is an alum of CDSP, the feeling of being on tip toe of expectation, eager for the learning process, and not always sure where it will lead has not changed.

To be a part of a community whose students, faculty, and staff come from various parts of the world, bringing a myriad of experiences, makes us all grow from the challenges and interactions that are part of that life. This year for example we graduated students from places like Washington, DC, Boston, LA, Cincinnati and Cleveland, Honolulu, and Pocatello, ID, many parts of California, Cameroon, the Philippines and Brazil. They went to places like Harlan, KY, Las Vegas, Cambridge, MA, Tucson, Stockton, La Grande, OR, Seattle, and St. Louis. They are parish priests and school and hospital chaplains, teachers, social workers, youth workers, healers and retreat leaders.

In their places students have begun to arrive from Korea, Philadelphia, Burlington, VT, Oklahoma City, Milwaukee, Reno, Minneapolis, Japan, and Hong Kong. Orientation is only a week away and already you can feel the shift as we all gear up for this new academic year. And although it feels new on one level, all new years bring this sense of excitement and anticipation as well as the question that often goes unspoken but sounds sort of like this, "What have I gotten myself into?" And that is because most students come to seminary at a tremendous sacrifice. Sometimes it means uprooting a family, selling a home, and moving miles away. It has become quite common in recent years to leave a family behind and spend a lot of time commuting. Also most students begin this journey not knowing, and with no promises, that there will be a job or a call when the diploma is safely in hand. Almost all leave a supportive church community behind and have to start all over building community in the seminary and in the wider church world. There is no MapQuest or GPS system that shows them the way.

And of course a seminary education comes at a big financial cost and many leave school with debt that is not always easy to pay off given the level of clergy salaries. That is why our partnerships with parishes like St. Peter's are so vitally important. Your commitment to help educate students and also to help keep their debt level to a minimum is huge, and we are deeply grateful.

I couldn't help reading the scripture lessons for the day without thinking of seminary and her students. In Jeremiah we hear God's call to Jeremiah to become a prophet. This is similar to other calls in the Bible: Moses, Gideon, Ezekiel, and Isaiah. They all had an encounter with God, received a commission to do God's will or speak God's word, and were designated for this role with a ritual act or sign.

Jeremiah's encounter begins with God saying, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." In Jeremiah's case he immediately responds to God by saying, "I do not know how to speak for I am only a child". But God's reassuring words comes with a promise of being there always and of giving Jeremiah the words he will need. And if that is not enough God reaches out and touches Jeremiah's lips telling him his mouth is now filled with the words needed to confront all nations and people.

This very intimate and personal encounter with God is how some seminarians describe the beginning of their journeys toward ordination. But not all of us have had this happen. In fact most of us would explain our calls as coming through a variety of people, church communities, and experiences and in some cases being in the right place at the right time. But we all probably if the truth be known had some of the fear that Jeremiah experienced, knowing that a call from God for any of us, lay or ordained, comes with a price and a radical transformation because once we acknowledge that we are God's, life can never be the same.

Now looking at the Gospel reading from Luke we see Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. This was not unusual because Jesus found himself often in the place where he had spent a lot of his life. Remember even as a boy of 12 he was in the synagogue listening to the rabbis and asking them all sorts of questions, and all who were there were amazed at his teaching and level of knowledge.

This time in the midst of his teaching he is distracted by a woman who has been bent over for 18 years. We don't know her age but she probably is not all that old because to Jesus her stooping does not seem to be caused by the aging process. Instead Luke tells us that a spirit has done this to her, and further on in the story the spirit is identified as Satan. The woman does not seem interested in Jesus but rather it is Jesus who calls to her. And before he even lays his hands on her, he tells her she is free of that which causes her to stoop. Jesus is immediately reprimanded by the leader of the synagogue for healing on the Sabbath. But Jesus won't let the distraction take center stage and brings us back to the healing and the importance of God's work and touch no matter when and where it happens.

This reminds us who is in control, and it is not us. We cannot pick and choose when God will speak to us or call us forth or set us on a journey that may not be of our own choosing. What we are called to do is be open and to see that doors stand open even when we think they are closed. Healing and being called to work in God's vineyard is the gift that each of us is offered. It is up to us to say yes no matter how afraid of the unknown we might be.

For me and for Harriet that call from God led us to seminary and particularly to CDSP. Now I realize that I am biased about residential seminaries because that is the path I took, but having been a parish priest for 28 years I know how important that time back in the 70's when I was at CDSP was for my formation. In the Episcopal Church we do not ordain people for a particular place but rather we ordain for the whole church, and I might add for the wider world.

What we have in Berkeley is an amazing gift. The experience of being with others not just at an Episcopal seminary but in an ecumenical and interfaith consortium of schools like the Graduate Theological Union of which CDSP is a part, helps prepare people for the richness of God's creation. To learn outside our comfort zones, to worship with new and emerging liturgies, to engage in discussions with those who are different from ourselves, to be challenged to articulate God in our lives and the lives of others, and to experience the wider church community is not unlike what happened to Jeremiah when God says, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

I like to think of this call, this transformation, which is offered to all of us when we are baptized and become part of the Christian community, as an adventure. When we say yes to follow Christ no matter where that might lead, we are in for the journey of a lifetime. W H Auden wrote the words of a hymn in our hymnal that helps sum up what this journey looks like for me. Here is his poem, slightly altered:

He is the Way.  
Follow him through the Land of Unlikeness:  
You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.  
Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety:  
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.  
Love him in the World of the Flesh:  
And [in your baptismal journey] all its occasions shall dance for joy.