



**February 11, 2007**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 4:21-30

## “A bad case of the ‘onlys’”

This coming June I will reach the twenty year mark since my ordination and entry into pastoral ministry. The process followed to reach ordination is long and involved. Along that road candidates for ministry are asked to recount (over and over again!) the story of their call to ministry.

First you tell that story to your own pastor—then to your church’s Staff Parish Relations committee. If Staff Parish affirms your call, at the next Annual Church Conference of your local church, you share your account again, and seek your church’s recommendation as a candidate for ministry. After that you are assigned a mentoring pastor where you together review that call to ministry and study texts on ministry. The next step is meeting with the District Committee on Ordained Ministry, where you are asked to describe God’s calling again.

On top of this, you need to attend seminary for a Master of Divinity degree, and in many of your classes you are asked to describe your call once more.

The final step is meeting with the Northern Illinois Conference Committee on Ordained Ministry, where you are interviewed and voted on for ordination. Those folks want to hear the story of your call to ministry, too!

So- I went through all of this myself. Here are some highlights of that story.

When the youngest of our four children was in first grade, I began to consider going back to school to equip myself for a rewarding career. I zeroed in on becoming a counselor, and researched the possibility of getting a Masters degree in Social Work.

At this point my husband and I were actively involved in our local church in Bolingbrook. Prior to that, we had regularly attended a United Methodist Church, but that was it—we didn't sing in choirs or serve on committees. In Bolingbrook that changed—the church was only a few years old, most of the membership were young adults with families like us—and the leadership was not shy about inviting people like us into active ministry. We loved it.

We also became involved in Marriage Encounter ministries, which took us outside our church into a broader community, where we served as workshop leaders.

Neither Gilles nor I had consistent experiences with a church community growing up. When we met and married we were completely unchurched. But God was doing some new things in our life.

One night, after I talked to my husband about what I was learning regarding a social work degree, he astounded me. Out of the blue, with no warning he said, “Have you ever thought of being a minister?”

After a shocked pause, I roared with laughter. “Me??? You’ve got to be kidding! I’m not a real holy person! I don’t know the Bible very well. I didn’t go to Sunday School or church that much. I’m only an AVERAGE kind of church member!” But Gilles was undeterred. “No, I’m serious. I think you’d be a good pastor.”

We continued to talk over the next few weeks. Finally I decided to talk to my pastor, and he agreed with my husband saying, “Ronni, I can see you in ministry- I think it’s possible God could be calling you.”

I’m going to tell you one of my biggest reservations about this, that I kept bringing up to God in prayer. I was immersed in raising four children. It seemed to me that being a pastor might in some ways be like having several hundred children. I wasn’t sure I was up for that!

But I was thinking and pondering all this in my heart. I spoke to church friends, to Marriage Encounter friends. They all said, “Yes, oh yes, Ronni, I think you’d be a good pastor.”

My pastor introduced me to a friend who was a professor at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston. I went for a visit. I was encouraged by all they told me.

Door after door opened before me. I passed through some long nights of prayer and doubt. Finally I said, “OK, God. I’ll do it. But you’ve got to guide me step by step

because I don't really know what I'm doing!" In papers I wrote in seminary I described my process in these terms:

*It felt a little bit like being selected in the school yard at recess to go to the teacher with a risky question.... Kids gathering around me saying, "Yeah, Ronni Sue, YOU do it! YOU ask her!"—pushing me in the teacher's general direction.*

I found it very comforting to learn in my study of the Bible that many, many others reacted similarly to God's call:

Around 1200 B.C., a Hebrew child of an enslaved people destined for slaughter by the forces of Egyptian imperialism, was rescued and raised by the Pharaoh's daughter. As a young man he discovered his roots, and enraged by an Egyptian's mistreatment of a Hebrew slave, he murdered the man and hid his crime. He fled as a refugee to a neighboring land, where the Midianites, distant relatives of the Hebrew people, led a nomadic life. This man's name was Moses. God called him to deliver his people in Egypt, to lead them out of bondage. Moses' response? "I can't stand up to the Pharaoh! I'm in a peaceful place, building a good life. I'm ONLY a shepherd! I'm wanted for MURDER back in Egypt! Besides, I can't even talk good!"

Some generations later, after Moses successfully led the Hebrews out of Egypt, there came a time of danger to the Israelites. Bedouin bands from across the Jordan were making forays into Israel's territory. The Lord came to Gideon, who would become one of the judges of ancient Israel, saying, "Go .. to deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; .. I send you." Gideon replied, "What!! I'm the ONLY the youngest one in my family! My family is the most insignificant clan in my community! How could I do this?"

Much later, a descendent of a Hebrew priest named Jeremiah, was called by God to be his prophet. Jeremiah's ministry began in 627 B.C. and continued more than 40 years. But when God told Jeremiah of his predestined identity as God's prophet, Jeremiah said, "But I'm ONLY a kid! I could never speak for you!"

About two thousand years ago, a young woman living in Nazareth met up with the angel Gabriel, who told her she'd been chosen to bear God's son. Very troubled, she said, "I'm ONLY an unmarried young girl! How could I bear a child?" Jesus' disciples, when told by Jesus to feed the multitudes said, "We're not Bill Gates or Donald Trump! We're ONLY fishermen! All that's here to eat is five pitiful loaves of bread and two fish!"

We humans sure seem to have a bad case of the “only”s when God calls us to serve him.

Remember, God calls EVERYONE to ministry in Christ’s name, not just pastors. Remember what God told Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.” God claims us as precious sons and daughters from before our birth. First God claims us, then God calls us.

Where is God calling YOU to do his work? Have you been telling him, “I’m only this, God---- I’m only that—“?

The other kind of “only”s we humans are prey to is the “You’re only....” kind. That’s what the hometown folks in Nazareth threw at Jesus: “You’re only the son of a local family! You’re only the brother of some local kids—who are you to teach us God’s truth?”

It may be that we’ve heard some “only”s directed to us as we’ve grown up and through the years. Those may echo so loudly in our memory that we can’t get past them—we’ve internalized them and repeat them ourselves.

The cure of the “only”s is given by God to us. God claims you as his precious son, his precious daughter. When we are baptized he lays his hand upon us saying, “You are mine.” God tells us, “You are the only and only YOU in this world. No one else can be your particular kind of witness to God’s love. NO ONE ELSE CAN DO YOUR UNIQUE MINISTRY. YOU’RE THE ONE!”

Friends, I came to this time and place of ministry ONLY because there were OTHERS who said, “Yes, YOU are the ONE to be a pastor in service to Christ.” Turn to one another right now, and say, “You’re the One!”

Before you were born God knew you. God claims you, and now God calls you. What will you tell him when he calls?

(Review brochure of ministry opportunities on the bulletin. Explain sign-up table.)