

At the 10:30 am service on May 9, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Psalms 67 and Acts 16:9-15.

“Help!”

Most of us know the origin of the following words but probably not as spoken words:

Help, I need somebody,
 Help, not just anybody,
 Help, you know I need someone, help.

When I was younger, so much younger than today,
 I never needed anybody's help in any way.
 But now these days are gone, I'm not so self assured,
 Now I find I've changed my mind and opened up the doors.

Help me if you can, I'm feeling down
 And I do appreciate you being round.
 Help me, get my feet back on the ground,
 Won't you please, please help me?

Yes, they were written by Beatles John Lennon with Paul McCartney at John's Weybridge home, Kenwood, England, in April 1965. According to Steve Turner in his book, *A Hard Day's Write: The Stories Behind Every Beatles Song*, the lyrics reflect John's dissatisfaction with himself. He was eating and drinking too much, had put on weight and felt overwhelmed by the fact they were such worldwide celebrities.

The song continues:

And now my life has changed in oh so many ways,
 My independence seems to vanish in the haze.
 But every now and then I feel so insecure,
 I know that I just need you like I've never done before.

Help me if you can, I'm feeling down
 And I do appreciate you being round.
 Help me, get my feet back on the ground,
 Won't you please, please help me?

The song, he would later admit, really was a cry for help, despite being written to order for their second film. "I needed the help," he said. "The song was about me." He seemed to be admitting that fame, wealth and success had only increased his anxiety.

Lennon said later: "When you're drowning, you don't say 'I would be incredibly pleased if someone would have the foresight to notice me drowning and come and help me,' you just scream." John is honestly reflecting a universal feeling where every one at some point in their life is going through a struggle and needs help. It was courageous of Lennon to admit it. This kind of honesty made him a successful song writer.

In the New Testament biblical text today Paul is in the town of Troas, current day Turkey, and in a vision hears a plea for help from a man in current day Greece. Cries for help are coming from Greece today and that's another story but it shows that certain things don't change.

The text reads: "During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" Unlike Lennon, the man is not identified. Paul immediately recognizes the vision as a call from God to proclaim the good news in Macedonia. Without delay he sets sail for this northern region of Greece.

An aside: The text calls this a vision. Some call it a dream and others a mystical experience. All are ways of hearing God. I happen to think it is a vision – in this case Christian – which is simply a picture in the mind's eye of a message from God. It may come during prayer or meditation, at a time of danger (as I heard this week of a person in an accident who saw a vision of angels), or during a walk on the beach or anywhere.

Morton Kelsey writes in his book *The Christian and the Supernatural* that at certain critical times in life, some people seem to be given a visionary glimpse into the universe as a whole, or sometimes into the depth of one aspect of it. The biblical book of Revelation is one record of such a view. Many of the great mythologies undoubtedly originated in this way, as well as most of the greatest religious poetry. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is not only truly superb poetry but also one of the greatest expressions of just such a vision...Such experiences also come to many ordinary people who are striving to become whole and integrate their lives around a coherent meaning.

Kelsey speaks of the general tendency today, as he calls it, to deny that there is any reality behind visions. He writes: "Those who deny the existence of such a reality generally forget that it is up to them to prove that it does not exist, and this is very tricky. In fact the only way to prove this is to demonstrate that one knows all there is about the world and has left no stone unturned where such a reality could lie hidden from view. When the best of physicists simply say they do not know that much about the world, it seems rather silly for any of the rest of us to be so dogmatic..."

Like Kelsey, I'm open to the possibility and reality of visions and how they can be words, visits, or promptings by God. It's amazing that the Gospel goes to Europe for the first time via Paul's vision. The vision does not identify the man. He is simply a messenger inviting Paul to communicate the good news of Jesus Christ to people in Macedonia in need of help. It is interesting to note that the first person to respond to Paul's message was not a man but a woman, Lydia, and her women friends. Some commentators wonder if she is the "man" in the vision.

Lydia was a business woman who made and sold purple cloth to those permitted to wear purple in the region, the elite of Philippi. She was a religious person and didn't appear to be in need of help and yet she embraces this gospel. Perhaps there was there a hidden cry for help? Whatever it was, Paul's message touched her.

It's important to note at this point the use of the plural in the vision story. "During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to *them*." The calling was to Paul and his band to proclaim God's good news, not to an individual but to the people of Macedonia. The first stop on the way is Philippi. For the purposes of this sermon I'm going to stick with this city.

We are told in the text that it is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. According to Peter Oakes in his Cambridge University Press book, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, it had a population of 15,000. The elite comprised 3 percent of the population; landowning farmers and pensioned colonists (retired army officers) made up 25 percent; skilled workers, merchants and service providers amounted to 45 percent; and the poor comprised the remaining 27 percent. Slaves (about 20 percent of the total population) were included in the households of the elites, farmers and colonists.

The church that eventually formed at Philippi probably had a modest membership of perhaps seventy-five to one-hundred persons who mirrored the general population. Except for the slaves, there is no discernible need for help in the general population. Again: Were there hidden cries for help?

I guess we can ask this of any community since Lydia and these communities reflect our general communities. I know that disenfranchised communities – the poor and oppressed of the world (the slaves in this story) – would benefit immensely from the Christian good news. Paul addresses the issue of slavery elsewhere but doesn't call for its abolishment. It was too big to address at this point of history and Christian ministry. That would come much later with likes of Christian minister, William Wilberforce, in England and various folk in this country. Paul does at least call on slave-owners to treat their slaves humanely and fairly. He goes as far to say that there is no longer slave or free; we are all one in Christ. Lydia must have heard the good news when Paul affirmed that there was no longer male or female; we are all one in Christ. On both accounts, this was a radical message back then.

The rest of the Philippi community seemed to be very much like the citizens of Marin. There are no discernible pleas or cries for help. It is said that authentic mission is always a response to a need within the community, not simply the missionary's need to proclaim. And yet, Paul Tillich states on the cover of our bulletin: "There is no love that does not become help."

If, as the biblical text implies, the good news addresses situations needing help we need to discern where help is needed and whether we can address these needs. Our Mission Outreach Committee looked at this at last Wednesday's meeting. They looked at our local, national and global mission. The Worship and Christian Education Committee looked at ways that we can better communicate the good news to our children who certainly face difficulties and challenges in their world. Our children will be immensely supported by a strong faith, as we all are.

Psychologist Kenneth Hardy, speaking at the recent California Marriage and Family Therapists Annual Conference in Los Angeles, said people who have homes may still be psychologically homeless. Isolation, separation from loved ones, loneliness, joblessness (which is loss of security and community that comes from the workplace), etc., contribute to psychological homelessness. People need healthy relationships. The good news of churches like ours, this household of God, is that we are home – a community where compassion, affirmation and love are found.

John Lennon for all his wealth and fame shows us that even in the best of circumstances and maybe as a result of the best of circumstances we need help. Maybe he gives us a glimpse of our society's needs. He keenly saw his own personal needs and the needs of the world.

God meets us in our personal needs and helps us see the needs, pleas and cries of our immediate and distant neighbors and encourages us to share good news to all. The man pleading for help in Paul's vision is Everyman and Everywoman calling for help. We are called to hear the cries of "Help!" and like Paul and his band to share God's good news the best we can. Amen.