

October 26, 2025

Rev. Mike Eller

## **“The Spirit that Haunts and Calls”**

Luke 18:9-14

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This sermon comes with a disclaimer, and even with that there's a further word of warning that I am in my “Dad Jokes” prime, now with two middle schoolers at home! So listener, beware. You have to know that this sermon just might haunt you... in a good, *Holy Spirit* kind of way. This sermon might even scare the hell out of you... literally. This sermon's about our transformation—no costumes required. But don't be afraid—it hopes to only raise spirits. Yes, these cheesy puns show that I'm quite in the Halloween mood this week. You might call this a Halloween sermon but I promise it'll be more like Casper the Friendly Ghost than anything truly spooky. I think the older I get, my tolerance for spooky things continues its decline. These days, I'm fine to sort of hang out in the area of Spookly the cartoon Square Pumpkin, that even my kids have outgrown.

If I can begin a little autobiographical. So recently, I've been doing some reflecting back on my story. I grew up in the world of warm Christian community, of comforting church music, of the glow of short candles during Silent Night, of the sobriety of observing communion in silence sitting next to my Mom in the church pew, of watching baptisms and noticing the change in countenance on the faces of the newly baptized, of the mystery around what happens in earnest prayer circles.

Something, during those earlier years, was getting ahold of me, I knew not what. And though I thought I had words for it at the time, I couldn't adequately speak to what had so gripped me. All I knew is once it did, it wouldn't let me go. It felt like a call. But not a call to religion necessarily or even to the vocation of church work—that would come much later—it was a call from what lies beneath all of that. Or rather, in the name of which Christian worship and ministry are acting. That call in my life would become more pronounced, persistent, insistent—one, I have ever since been trying to answer.

I resonant with how the unorthodox Christian writer, Anne Lamont, describes her own call. She says: "I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner . . . The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus . . . This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition." She said: "Everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in." After trying to resist for a week, Lamont finally relented: "All right. You can come in."

All of this language may be quite familiar to you. Most of us have a calling story of sorts. You might be thinking about your own. It's perhaps what we might call our moment of salvation. Yet, if we thought hard enough, we might even recall smaller moments—little callings—that led up to that one bigger moment. We speak of it as God *nudging us, speaking to us, knocking* on the doors of our hearts and asking to be let in.

I've titled this sermon, *The Spirit Who Haunts and Calls*. I'm being a bit provocative, even spooky, on purpose with this, being that we are just days away from Halloween. Partly, to draw in those among us that have all-things-spooky on the mind this week, but also because of the conviction that **I believe God "gets things done" in the world by haunting the world with a call—the call of love, the call to reform or transform, the call to peace-making and justice.** And to be clear, God's calling doesn't come as a startling Boo! of Hollywood ghosts. But as a quiet question. A loving nudge. A gentle provocation. One arrests us through fear, stopping us dead in our tracks. The other animates us toward life-giving action.

Last week, in our Lectionary text, we read about the persistent widow who constantly pleads with an unjust judge that justice be done. Though the judge initially resists her pleas, even ignoring her cries, being consumed by his own purposes, he finally relents because of her insistence, if only to silence her nagging. We often put ourselves in the place of the widow, and God as the judge. And while I think there is something important being said, from that understanding, about the persistent nature of prayer, I wonder if the parable could also be read in a different way. What if, instead, we see ourselves as the judge—the one who *can* bring about justice in our spheres of influence, the one who can act on behalf of the vulnerable. Yet how often we get wrapped up in our own way and disregard the persistent call of the Caller.

This, we hear echoed in Scripture, where in **Psalms 82**, God asks of earthly judges: “How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked?” (vs. 2)

And in **Deuteronomy 27**, it says: “Cursed be anyone who deprives an alien, an orphan, or a widow of justice.” (vs. 19)

In Jesus’ parable, it’s only when the judge finally relents and answers the persistent call—saying “yes” and “opens the door to let it in” as it were—that justice happens.

I recently listened to a conference speaker, Dr. Tripp Fuller, talk about Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory. That’s a fancy name for the view that Jesus had to die on the cross to appease an angry God who demanded a human sacrifice for sins. Fuller spoke about how for many of us, this understanding of the cross can be nightmarish for those of us who grew up in shame and fear, shrinking under God’s vengeful wrath. In this view, humans are thought of as a worm, worthless without Jesus, born into the stain of sin. He asked: What if instead of being a nightmare, the cross gives us the right kind of nightmares. He used the example of Scrooge.

Think of old Scrooge, left to his own, his life ends on a trajectory of bitterness, indecency, and loneliness that his life projects. He was cruel to his employees, took advantage of the vulnerable, and ultimately lived life for his own accomplishments. And he is haunted, NOT into fear—though he is quite shaken—but he is spooked into *participation* in life. Scrooge is visited by the ghost of Christmas past, who, through the power of memory, breaks something open in Scrooge’s heart that enables him to see his complicity in systems of harm and exploitation. Refusing to let Scrooge whither in isolation, all three spirits come as a disruption, an interruption, to the way things were.

The cross stands over us to haunt our ways of living for self, of living to simply accumulate in this life, of prideful existence. It refuses to leave us alone in our nestled, stodgy ways. So, this call—this haunting—too comes to us as a daily choice. Jesus posed the choice in the form of today’s parable.

Two men, one a Pharisee and one a Tax-Collector, both go to the temple to pray. The well-off, religious one—the Pharisee—prays, full of self-righteousness and compares himself to others who he deems are worse off than him. The other, a lowly person in the eyes of society, but also poor in spirit, cries out to God from a place of humility and vulnerability. Jesus says

that this one is “justified” for “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” This is the leveling of the kingdom of God. The prideful will be haunted by the Voice of Love, the cross of self-sacrifice until they are brought low, but the humble will be exalted from their low position until they are raised up. The cross gives us the right kind of nightmares toward this great leveling of all things.

To be sure, these aren’t spooky nightmares. As of late, Empire has been haunted in the form of a guy in an inflatable green frog suit. And millions around the world are showing up in peaceful protest, standing face-to-face against the nightmare of authoritarian rule. **Once we say “yes” to God’s persistent call in our own lives, God uses us to haunt the ways of the world.**

On one dark Halloween night in 1517, the haunt of God’s call sounded like the repetitive rap of metal against wood. Loud knocking could be heard down the corridors of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany. This was Martin Luther nailing to the door his paper listing 95 reforms, condemning the excesses and corrupt practices of the Roman Catholic Church. Today, we recognize Reformation Sunday, and call back to the echoes of Martin Luther’s hammer as the continual call of justice, even within our religious institutions. The work of Reformers like Luther, John Calvin, and especially John Knox, are the foundation of Presbyterian faith and tradition. “Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda” (The Church is Reformed and Always Reforming). This is the slogan which seeks to keep the church always open to the nudgings of a living God. This is to acknowledge that “the church even at its best is a frail and fallible human institution.” When we say that God is a living God, we acknowledge that “God is not bound, either to our tradition or to our particular contemporary context. God’s revelation is always a gift, but never a given.” Today, the Spirit that challenged the powers of the institution on that Halloween night 1517, is still at work.

Next Sunday, we officially begin a Mission Study in this church. This can be our own Reformation. This is a chance to hear God’s Spirit anew, with gentle questions and nudgings about where we might change and grow. Next Sunday, we’ll come together following the service to reflect on the stories that have shaped this congregation over the years.

You have in your bulletin a post-it note. Today, on Reformation Sunday, I want us to think about how God might be calling us. And in the spirit of the reformers, you can write on your post-it note and come place in on the door.

The youth in the Confirmation Class earlier have already done theirs. You might write a thought about how you feel God has been persistently calling to you lately, to act in love or justice, in a particular way, how the church needs to grow and reform in a particular area or ministry. Maybe there's an area of the church's ministry that needs to cease or expand in some way, that we would be more Christ-like in our community. I'll give you a few minutes as the piano plays. Come and nail your thoughts to the door.