

“Called”

We're all called to something ...

January 27, 2008

Text: Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23

I.

This scripture I just shared with you, from Matthew's gospel, describes Jesus' *calling* of his disciples. In the Church, as well as in the Bible, there's a big emphasis on *calling*, on being *called*.

For example, as your pastor, I'm supposed to have a sense of *being called* to our church. When the Pastoral Search Committee of our church recommended me to the congregation for a congregational vote, back in April of 2000, after the vote—which, fortunately, was positive—you, the church, extended to me a *call*. You *called* me to be your pastor.

Such a *call* has terms and covenantal understandings ... somewhat like a contract. But the language that is used for hiring a minister is the language of *call*. And this is all rooted in the Bible.

In the Old Testament, for example, the Hebrew prophets were *called* by God to be God's messenger ... to be God's voice. In the New Testament, the Christian Scriptures, Jesus *called* his disciples to come and follow him.

Our *calling* has to do with a larger sense of who we are as a person. It connects some blending of our personal gifts and spirit to a focused profession, or mission, or life-purpose in the world. And, of course, our *calling* is closely linked to our identity—to how we think of ourselves.

Before I went to seminary, at the age of 28, my identity (the way I thought of myself) was more like that of a young social worker ... a former Peace Corps Volunteer, an anti-poverty worker with OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity) ... and also that of an athlete. That's how I thought of myself.

Then, when I enrolled in seminary, right away in my field work assignments—working in churches on Sundays—people started related to me as a minister. When I did my internship in Honolulu in 1973-74, people in the Presbyterian Church where I was interning began calling me pastor or reverend. For me, this was a major shift in identity.

How do you think of yourself? What's your calling?

Many of you are teachers, or business persons in some capacity. We have a number of lawyers, one doctor, a few social workers ... some high tech folks and a bevy of people who work in the service industry.

II.

Certainly, one of the characteristics of *calling* in the Bible is that it's connected to God and to a higher purpose.

In Jesus' *calling* of his first disciples, we can sense this.

1. The two sets of brothers who are called in our reading this morning—Peter and Andrew, and then James and John—no doubt already had some sense of *calling* as fishermen. This was their identity; this is who they were.
2. But then Jesus comes along and invites them to an even higher *calling*: to be his followers and, as he says, to become *fishers of men*, or fishers of human beings. And for them, of course, this was a whole new world, a whole new identity.

The idea itself of *calling* is dynamic ... it's alive with energy ... and, most importantly, it's focused on the future. To what is God calling you?

When we're *called* to some new vocation or purpose, in the process, there's a letting go of our previous life ... a letting go of the past. To some extent, this was true for me in the ministry. Again, the future is calling.

Our *calling* to the future is not a forgetting; it's a moving on. Certainly, that's what happened with the disciples. They were still fishermen. They were still family men, those who had families. But they were also—now—in the power of the moment and the promise of tomorrow—followers of Jesus.

And as this new *calling* began to live in their heart and spirit, increasingly, it became riveting and all-consuming of their life-focus.

III.

Friends, we're all called to something ... to some function, some role, some mission or vocation ... to some life-purpose. I'm not suggesting that we have all discovered our *calling*. Perhaps we haven't. But there's a *calling* to be discovered for every human being.

Discerning our *calling*, figuring it out, can be a difficult prospect. No doubt, sometimes we never do figure it out. Other times, perhaps, we have a sense of our *calling*, but we lack the courage or the circumstances to do anything about it.

Early on in life, we may struggle with our sense of *calling*. And that's okay. We don't have to have it all figured out by the time we graduate from high school or college or whatever. There's far too much pressure in our culture on young people to know every detail of their life-plan by the time the graduate from middle school.

Often times, our *calling* comes over years of sorting ourselves out. For example, when I was back in seminary some twelve years ago doing my Doctor of Ministry, most of the seminarians were second career people; and the majority of them were women.

If we think about it, it makes sense. Years ago in our country, women were pretty much limited to a handful of professions that were deemed *acceptable* for women. Women were supposed to be teachers or nurses, or secretaries. Women weren't encouraged to be doctors or lawyers or architects, and certainly not ministers.

Fortunately, for all of us, that has mostly changed in recent decades; to the point where now we have a woman running for President of the United States.

And of course, as we see with Barack Obama, the same argument can be made for minorities. As opportunity opens up, our calling and identity are expanded and extended as well.

IV.

The larger point in all of this is that our sense of *calling* can evolve, as the times in which we live evolve. When I look at my own family, my mother was never encouraged to go to college, even though she was valedictorian of her high school. Her younger brother was encouraged ... and went on to become a medical doctor.

Now, two generations removed, my two daughters grew up pretty much assuming they would—not only go to college—but to graduate school and beyond ... which, we're grateful to acknowledge, they've both done.

Again, our sense of *calling* evolves with the times.

An important element in all of this is to be awake to the *callings* that might be growing in our spirit at any time. Not only are we all called to something, but we may have more than one *calling*. And one *calling* may, over time, give way to a still newer *calling*.

Personally, I think the Spirit is always calling us to something. It may be to some new awakening in our spirit. It may be to a new realization of our gifts. It may be to a quiet acceptance of the realities of today that are different from yesterday. But, whatever it is, the Spirit is always working in our lives. **God is NEVER done with any one of us.**

Another way of saying this is that *the light of God's love and truth* is always seeking to break through. God is forever working redemptively in our lives, no matter what our life situation.

V.

Our reading from **Isaiah** gives us a glimpse of this. Israel was always in the grip of some sort of upheaval. It's important to have a sense of the background for Isaiah 9:

1. To begin with, it's the period of the *divided kingdom*, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. **Isaiah** is preaching to the south, to Judah.
2. As it turns out, Israel, the northern kingdom, has formed an unseemly alliance with Syria against Judah, the southern kingdom.
3. They were all Jews, all Israelites, in both the northern and southern kingdoms. And God wasn't at all pleased with this alliance ... and wants to encourage Judah.

And so the prophet **Isaiah** speaks out about how the day is coming when God will *make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations*.

And then, going on ...

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light ...

Those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

For the yoke of their burden ... the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressors, has been broken.

For the Southern Kingdom, this is Good News. This sinister alliance against them had them trembling with fear.

Here, God is *calling* Judah, the Southern Kingdom, to a new reality, to a new confidence about the future.

And Matthew, referring to this passage in Isaiah, interprets the *Galilee of the nations* reference to mean—and most scholars agree—a *Galilee of the Gentiles* ... which, of course, means that Jesus' ministry and teachings are not just for the Jews, but for the whole world.

God's truth and love and the way they are embodied in Jesus, God's *chosen one*, God's **Messiah**, are for everyone.

However, if we're not awake to the larger purpose in all of this—to the BIG PICTURE—we can easily forget ... and start to go our own way.

VI.

That's when we need to heed the words of Psalmist from **Psalm 27**:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

*Hear, O Lord, when I cry out, be gracious to me and answer me!
Come, my hearts says, seek his face. Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me. (We're invited to seek God's face, God's presence)*

We're all the recipients of some divine calling. We need only search it out ... which is not always easy. But again, the important thing to remind ourselves is that our *calling* and our *identity* are always in the process of evolving, of growing.

1. Many of you are retired ... but God still has important things for you to do ... new *callings* for you to undertake.
2. Others of us are moving towards retirement ... where new *callings* always await us. It's unbelievable how busy *retired* people are ...
3. Others here today are full-steam ahead in your careers. You may feel a strong sense of *calling* to what you are doing or you may not. Some of you may change careers and embark on a new adventure, a new *calling*.

Again, God is always *calling* us to something.

At the same time, having said that, as Christians, our *callings*, at some point are rooted in God's purposes. And we understand those purposes in and through Jesus Christ. His life ... his values ... his commitments ... and his cross, always a symbol of sacrificial love. Our identity as Christians—our calling—is always tied to this love.

In and through our various *callings*, friends, let us *seek God's face* in all things; and along the way, let the kingdom of God come near.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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