

“CALLED”

**a sermon on Isaiah 49:1-7, I Corinthians 1:1-9, and John 1:29-42
January 15, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller
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So because of how the church calendar played out this year, we didn't have the opportunity to reflect on how Jesus began his ministry. The Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that when Jesus reached the age of thirty, he came to the Jordan river, where John was busily baptizing the masses for repentance – in preparation for the messiah's arrival – and was *himself* baptized by John, not for repentance, but as a demonstration of his obedience to the old law, that he came to fulfill.

The story of Jesus' baptism is another sermon, and one that I have actually already preached in this place – on Baptism of the Lord Sunday *last* year. Our Gospel reading this morning is from *John's* account, which doesn't explicitly say that Jesus was baptized by John. It is, however, in *perfect* agreement with the other Gospels about Jesus' first ministry “activity.” He called together the group of disciples who would become his innermost circle – the Apostles.

I can still remember the first time I was ever asked about my “calling.” I was a Junior in college, and having determined that I was going to attend seminary, I was required to meet with the session of my church, and ask for their “endorsement.”

“Mr. Goodwiller, please tell us about your sense of call to ordained ministry.” They might as well have asked me to talk about my recent visit to the moon. In my family, decisions about one's career were made on the basis of an honest assessment of aptitudes, essentially, what we could do well, and “enjoyed” doing . . . that someone would *pay* us to do. My dad, the very practical person that he was, also added what I would consider an “ethical” element to the deliberation. He viewed society as a working *system*, and believed that “job satisfaction” was directly related to understanding how what we did “fit” into that system.

Perhaps I should explain that dad was a mechanical engineer who was a manufacturer's representative for a company that made mixing and aerating equipment, and whose specialty was municipal waste water treatment. It was not what you might call a “glitzy” profession or job. But on the other hand, he was part of an industry that is absolutely *essential* in our societal *system*.

In my family, we never used terms like “calling,” or even “vocation” (which, after all, comes from the Latin word, *vocatio* – the same root as our word, “vocal,” and means that to which we are *called*). We just spoke of our “careers.”

Jesus’ “calling” of the disciples was not a new innovation. The concept was an ancient one. From the early account of God’s “calling” of the prophet Samuel,” who at the urging of his old mentor, Samuel replied, “here am I Lord, send me,” to the “call stories” of the later prophets, those who *spoke* on God’s behalf in the Old Testament routinely proclaimed their understanding that God had *put* them in their roles, and *given* them the words to say on God’s behalf.

Isaiah’s “personal call story” is recorded in chapter six of the prophecy, where he begins by stating “in the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. . .”

In today’s reading from that prophecy, Isaiah goes even further, suggesting that God doesn’t just call *individuals*. Isaiah 49 isn’t talking about a *person*. It is talking about Israel, the nation, and its calling to “bring Jacob back to him.” To regather the scattered tribes, under the leadership of the coming messiah – in which, presumably, every citizen of the land had a *role* to play.

The Reformers had a good deal to say about “calling” – particularly the calling of those entering the Gospel ministry, which is presumably why to this day we put so much emphasis on it *when an individual* expresses an interest in pursuing a theological education.

In particular, John Calvin wrote extensively about his understanding of God’s call to ministry, which he believed was in two *parts* – an “internal” call, and an “external” call, the absence of either one of which meant that the individual was not *truly* called.

The “external call,” in Calvin’s system, was the faith community’s confirmation that the candidate in fact exhibited the *gifts* for ministry – exhibited first in demonstrating that they had the academic ability to successfully complete the necessary studies, but then also in their demonstration of the pastoral aptitude necessary to lead a congregation to “call” them to serve as their pastor.

And that remains our ordination process to this day. Those who sense that God is calling them into ministry in our church are not simply “ordained” on the basis of that calling, as they are in some Christian bodies. In the Presbyterian system and process, they first head off to seminary and engage in a rigorous program of study. And when they have completed that study, even if they have

also successfully completed their written ordination exams, there is no “guarantee” that they will be ordained.

Ordination, for us, requires a calling body – either a congregation, or in the case of those called to “specialized ministries,” sometimes the call of a presbytery or other council of the church. Until that happens, no matter what a person *feels* or discerns *internally*, that individual is not “called of God” to ordained ministry.

It was a necessary “correction” in Calvin’s day, when the new humanist movement of which he and the other Reformers were a part had led to the “protestant” churches separating from the Roman Mother Church. As the pendulum swung away from the concept of one “world” Christian Church united by its devotion to the Pope, some were suggesting that the individual Christian experience of God’s call *in and of itself* was a sufficient and complete call to the ministry – meaning that there were no longer any external “standards” to be applied, and no communal “affirmation” required.

Which is all to say, one of the core values of our particular Christian tradition is its emphasis on the Christian *community* – and the role that we *all* play, *together*, in discerning both God’s presence and God’s direction in our lives. Our Christian affirmation is that the Church of Jesus Christ is the “new Israel” – the “nation” God has chosen as the vehicle to usher in the era of Grace and Love, in which the world’s people will (ultimately) be united.

As time went on, and I eventually attended seminary, and learned about what “call” means in our tradition, I became much more comfortable with the idea that God has “called” me into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. It wasn’t about hearing voices in my head. It was about discerning my *gifts*, and determining how those gifts could best serve God’s purposes. And in the end, that wasn’t such a different process than my dad’s. It just used different words, and actually focused my reflections more on the *outward* – on my “role” in God’s plan and purposes – than on the “inward.”

And in my discernment process, I also took considerable comfort in Paul’s writings about the Church, in that he didn’t just focus on God’s “gifting” some of the Church’s members for the work of preaching and teaching the faith, but also on *other* gifts - because the church and our society don’t just need *ministers*, they need members with a full range of diverse gifts.

And our theological affirmation is that God “gifts us” with what we need to be faithful servants, and then “sanctifies” or “blesses” the work we do as a result.

A Twentieth Century Reformed theologian named Emil Brunner reflected on that reality in his book, *The Divine Imperative*. He says, among other things, “The Calling teaches us to find the place assigned to us – both in Nature and in History – the place where we have been set in order to serve our neighbor. Indeed, it is only through the ideal of ‘the Calling’ that the idea of our ‘neighbor’ becomes definite.”

We live in a very “individualistic age,” when we are conditioned to make life decisions on the basis of what is best for ourselves, and when ideals like “independence” and “self-sufficiency” are glorified. Our “heroes” are often those can demonstrate that they can “make it” on their *own*. Scripture provides a clear corrective to individualism, proclaiming that it isn’t about you. Or me. It’s about *us*. All together. God hasn’t gifted you and me for the sake of you or me. God has gifted each and every one of us for the sake . . . and benefit . . . of what we each have to offer our *neighbors*, for the greater good of us all.

Now on the one hand, I can conceive of a “profession” or two that are challenging to place within that matrix; that is, for which it is difficult to find any redeeming value that work might have for the greater good – and which might therefore be a profession that is simply not one to which God would ever *call* us.

But on the other hand, I find a great number of professions and callings which *clearly* serve to keep the world going, and make it a better place, all sorts of “vocations” and “avocations,” professions and “interests,” ways that we make our livings, and ways that we volunteer our time and energy.

God calls *all* of us into service for the greater good – for the work of building up the body, and spreading the Good News. Jesus called together a small group of disciples to be his inner circle, and to become the ones we call Apostles. But it wasn’t about *them*. It was about *all* of us, and God’s redemption of our lives, which can turn even the simplest and most mundane tasks of our daily routines into service, and lives faithfully lived, if only we are willing to view them not just as living, or surviving, but as fulfilling our callings as God’s faithful disciples.

To God be the glory.