

"Our Holy Calling"

Isaiah 6:8; Ephesians 4:1-16

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If you ask people to list what they consider the most important moment of their life, it's a good bet they'll likely respond that it was the day they married their spouse or witnessed the birth of their children. For MYSELF, my spiritual conversion and subsequent call to ministry forty-eight years ago are right there alongside my marriage fifteen years ago to Rose rank HIGHEST on MY list. But then, I just might ALSO have to include March 2, 1986 at the Presbyterian Church of Felton, California- the day I was ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (USA). You see, that occasion was the culmination of thirteen long years of preparation for Christian ministry. Prior to that date, I had spent two years in a large university, four years in Bible college, and four more years doing Master of Divinity work at an accredited Presbyterian seminary. By then, I had preached on numerous occasions, led Bible studies, taught Sunday School classes, and served on any number of committees in the local church. I was examined by the Presbytery of San Jose and subsequently taken under care by them where for the next six years, I reported regularly to the Presbytery's Candidate's Committee which evaluated my on-going progress. While in seminary, I passed the grueling Standard Ordination exams, and even pastored a church for a year as part of my internship program. Someone once told me that my years of training exceeded that of a typical MEDICAL DOCTOR.

Yet, what qualified me to become a minister of the Gospel was NOT that service of ordination, nor all those years of education and preparation, but a calling that God had placed on my life, a summons to forsake every other ambition and follow him wherever he might lead me. Suddenly gone were my ambitions of teaching philosophy in a major college or university or becoming a writer and publishing the "great American novel." By echoing Isaiah's words, "Here I am, Lord. Send me!" I was relinquishing control over my own life and taking the enormous risk of following that still, small voice which promised to guide my steps. I remember how frightening it all was, and yet how wonderfully exhilarating at the same time. I didn't know where my travels would eventually take me but I knew I'd never be alone, that journeying right beside me would be Jesus Christ who would help make me to make responsible decisions along the way. But I ALSO knew that God's people--the Church--would be there, waiting to receive me, WHENEVER and WHEREVER that might be.

Over these many years, I've been privileged to exercise my gifts in many different places across this country. I've ministered in the scenic San Francisco Bay area as well as among the majestic redwood groves of Northern California; I've gone from the back roads of western Pennsylvania to the busy thoroughfares of New York and New Jersey's inner cities; I have preached amid the cornfields of Iowa and the factory towns of northwestern Indiana where much of America's steel is now being produced. I now find my journey has taken me back to where much of it FIRST STARTED- to Pittsburgh and the charming beauty of Western Pennsylvania. I like to think that along the way I've been enrolled in God's "School of the Spirit" as, throughout my

sojourn, I have seen my faith grow and my gifts for ministry expand and develop; I have found myself learning what it means to trust our Lord's guidance and provision even when I didn't HAVE ANYTHING or KNOW ANYBODY.

Even now, as I look out over this congregation, I don't see an assembly of strange faces but a gathering of brothers and sisters- no matter how old or young you may be. I've been accorded the unique privilege of proclaiming God's Word and leading you in worship each week. I'm allowed access, not only into your homes, but into your hearts and lives so as to become, as it were, an extended part of your own families. Indeed, Christ has knit us together into a single family. I find myself fortunate to be present in many of the most sacred moments of your lives- to unite you in marriage, to baptize your children, to remind you of our Lord's presence when you struggle through illness or tragedy, and to prepare you for death in this world and life for the next. I'm allowed to walk beside you as you journey YOURSELF through many of the great passages in your lives, an opportunity no OTHER comparable vocation shares.

But what's important to remember is that what has made me a minister of the Gospel was not those years of training and education, but rather a CALLING I heard almost fifty years ago, a voice deep in my soul saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" I heard that summons and subsequently responded with, "Here am I, Lord; send me!" Over the years, that call to ministry has been validated again and again by people such as yourselves, when you invited me to come and minister among you a little over a year ago.

You see, ministry must always begin with a CALL and not for any other reason. Isaiah became God's spokesperson because God directed him to speak his word. All of Israel's Patriarchs and prophets received a divine commission- from Noah to Abraham to Moses and Joshua; from David and the prophets, right through to Christ's own disciples. Jesus himself had said, "You did not choose me; I chose you!" In truth, no one simply wakes up one morning and says, "I know what I'll do with my life- I'll become a minister!"

During my last year in high school, I was playing pinball in the back of a New Jersey deli with a friend of mine whom I had gone through grade school with. As we took turns shooting the ball, we were discussing about what each of us wanted to do for the rest of our lives. I said that I wanted to write since I loved to read so much. He told me how neat he thought it would be to be a MINISTER- to work your own hours, perform every Sunday before a captive audience, have everybody respect and look up to you- he definitely had some strange notions as to what it was like to be minister. What startled me about his choice of profession was that he demonstrated little or no interest in God or the church. Rather, he was attracted to the ROLE that ministers tend to play- of often being a socially prominent figure, the resident holy man about town. He had no conception of the ministry as a calling from God to forsake all and follow him, or that the church was a spiritual body with Christ as its head. To my friend, a "minister" was a professional title and the church, a social organization along the same lines as the Rotary or the Kiwanis with a little organ music thrown in.

Well I don't think my friend was ALONE in his distorted understanding of ministers and the church. Several years ago, I invited a cemetery plot salesman into my home. At one point in the conversation, he said, "Come on, David- you're a salesman just like myself except where I sell plots

on earth, you sell mansions in heaven." This fellow couldn't have been more wrong. The truth is that ministry is a very demanding vocation- you must always be on call for any emergency that might arise. You are always offering support to people in need; having to care for persons you don't necessarily like; preaching ideals you YOURSELF find impossible to keep; loving others when you feel so darn unlovable yourself. Only a VOCATION FROM GOD WITH GOD'S HELP can ever enable one to fulfill such a calling.

Our text this morning is taken from St. Paul's epistle to the Christians at Ephesus. Throughout the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul has been unfolding the eternal purpose of God being worked out in history. Through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners and was raised from the dead, God is making an entirely new society for himself. Unlike the world we presently inhabit--a world characterized by conflict, alienation, and division--Paul sees a brand NEW humanity being created that is marked by its UNITY. With this letter, he is sharing this vision with the Ephesians.

With chapter four, he moves on from the NEW SOCIETY to the NEW STANDARDS which are expected of it; he turns from the theme of what GOD has done to what it is WE must now do. In the first three verses, he lays down five foundation stones of Christian unity--lowliness, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance, and love. When these five virtues are absent, all unity is gone, but when they are manifest within the life of the church, there is a unity there which NOTHING can prevail against.

The first attribute on Paul's list is LOWLINESS. There was no quality in the ancient world more DESPISED than this. To the Greeks, humility and submissiveness was NEVER something to be admired. After all, slavery was the lowest social station there was. It wasn't until Jesus Christ came that the world began to recognize the REAL virtue of lowliness, how he who was in the form of God assumed the form of a servant and died at the bidding of his Heavenly Father. Where we all want to dominate, to control, to appear as someone special, Christ not only asks us to follow his example, he gives us the power to lay personal privilege aside and serve one another in humility. It is the FIRST PRINCIPLE of the church.

Then there is MEEKNESS which is anything BUT a negative quality. A meek person demonstrates gentleness, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Lowliness and meekness belong together for they characterize the very disposition of our Lord who described HIMSELF as "gentle and lowly in heart."

Paul mentions PATIENCE and along with it, MUTUAL FORBEARANCE. Patience and long-suffering are the key ingredients to a real and lasting peace for mutual tolerance respects the rights of others and allows them to have their say.

And finally, there is LOVE, the quality that embraces the preceding four; it remains the crown and sum of ALL OTHER virtues. Love is not just a personal attitude or a passive tolerance of those different from ourselves- love actively and constructively SEEKS THE WELFARE AND GOOD OF OTHERS. It goes out of its way to MEET PEOPLE'S NEEDS AND BINDS AND HEALS HUMAN WOUNDS. And so, for Paul, lowliness, meekness, patience, mutual forbearance, and love are the virtues that define the church and her mission as

well as serve as the basis of all true unity. Without them, NONE of us would or could be called “Christian.”

This unity whereby we become one through an uncommon love and commitment to one another reflects the unity within God HIMSELF as expressed in v.4: “For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Whatever unity one might see and experience in the Church is actually the Holy Spirit working out its OWN unity of the Godhead in and through US. Thus our harmony and love for one another is an expression of the unity and love that ALREADY EXISTS between the members of the Trinity.

This unity continues to work its way out in the Church through the bestowment of gifts upon each and every member. However, these gifts are given for the enrichment of the ENTIRE BODY and not for the purpose of ENHANCING ONE’S SELF. These gifts are dispersed throughout the church’s membership so that each individual can contribute in service to the Lord; it is not merely the work of one person who happens to bear the title “reverend.” Equipping the laity for the work of ministry is important for two reasons: FIRST, from a practical standpoint, the work of the ministry can be accomplished more effectively when it is being performed by ALL the members of the body and not by the clergy alone. And SECOND, by making the task of ministry the responsibility of EVERY Christian, each person is able to exercise her or his gifts in service for the Lord. In this way, ALL Christians are given the opportunity to come to their potential as disciples. The implication is that every Christian has a work of ministry, a spiritual task and function in the body.

Paul goes on to enumerate a number of gifts that God gives to the Church. They include but are not limited to apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers which are bestowed “for the purpose of equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the fullness of Christ.” In other words, the task of ministry is the work of EVERY member of the church with the GOAL being that by working together, we eventually attain the UNITY AND LOVE as represented in the fullness of Christ. Working as one, with each member employing his or her spiritual gifts, we may then achieve FULL MATURITY IN CHRIST which is ULTIMATELY God’s will and objective for his people.

The great German reformer Martin Luther believed that God calls ALL Christians through their various social roles or stations, that EVERY Child of God by virtue of his or her BAPTISM has received the SAME EXACT CALL. Whether you are a factory worker or a bus driver, a teacher or a salesperson, a nurse or a housewife, you TOO have been summoned to represent Christ to the best of your ability and to demonstrate God’s love in the same unconditional way HE did. That call is not really an invitation to a particular job or career but rather the summons to faithfully follow Christ wherever he might lead REGARDLESS of where you may be or what it is you may do for a living. By virtue of our baptism, we are ALL called to love God with all our mind and all our heart and all our soul, and to love our neighbor as we do ourselves; it is a universal vocation to which all Christians inherit. In other words, our PRIMARY calling is not to a particular religious role or career but rather to a WHOLE NEW WAY OF LIFE.

As we have all received the same call, all of us have also been GIFTED. However, unlike our call, the GIFTS we have received are NOT the same. Not ALL of us are called to be Ministers of Word and Sacrament because that may not be your gift. Perhaps you are strong in finances or administration, then know that along with others, we need such persons to help make decisions that impact the church in those areas for the glory of God. Perhaps you have a love for young people or for many of the elderly who can't get out much, then know there are opportunities for ministry with the youth or in just maintaining contact with our shut-ins, especially during this time of pandemic. Maybe you have a passion to minister to the needs of the local community. In my last pastorate, among others we offered a food pantry, a resale shop, and a weekly luncheon that was offered for free to the community, and the reason these all proved SUCCESSFUL was because every person who worked for each of these ministries said he or she felt "CALLED" to do so. The fact is that EVERY ONE OF YOU has been gifted by God for the purpose of lifting up Christ and contributing to the unity of his church- only you have to be willing to use and develop your gift FIRST!

This morning, we are re-installing a couple of elders in one church, and ordaining and installing an elder in the other. They TOO have been asked to participate in this high and noble calling, in a ministry as REAL and VITAL as MY OWN. In fact, anyone who ever serves a church as an elder or deacon must take the very SAME ordination vows I publicly took many years ago in the front of that little church in Central California. What we are doing is recognizing the call that God gave THEM, that deep down in their hearts, a still, small voice asked, "Whom shall I send, and who shall go for us?" and their response was, "Here I am, Lord; send me! I want to go! I want to serve! Let me be your ambassador, your chosen representative! LET ME HELP LEAD YOUR CHURCH!"

By electing them and then ordaining them to their office, we REAFFIRM that call; we VALIDATE their ministry and grant them permission to exercise it within the boundaries of this congregation. Though our gifts may be different, it is still THE VERY SAME MINISTRY we share. Like myself, they are to be a SERVANT among us; it will also entail the sacrifice of their time, their energy, their resources and the rewards will often look small in return. Yet their satisfaction will come in serving others and in knowing that God has been gracious enough to call them and entrust them with just such a responsibility in the FIRST place. At times they may be tired or confused or even discouraged, but I ask them to just be patient for the same God who CALLS us also LEADS us and will STRENGTHEN us as we go along- he PROMISES us that! Once ordained, they will carry that office for life- they will be elders or deacons until the day they die. They will never stop exercising their gifts and I assure you that we will never refrain from asking them to use them again and again. And so, this morning, my sincerest prayer is that THEY, like ME and hopefully like YOURSELF, will discover THEIR call to be the noblest, most challenging, most exciting vocation in all the world. Amen and amen.