

What Compels the Call?

2 Corinthians 5.11-21

Thirty years ago this month (May 1979) Bishop Louis Schowengerdt laid hands on my head and ordained me as a pastor in the United Methodist Church. This was the culmination of a long process extending back to my experience of God's call, and even before. God had been preparing me to receive that calling, although I was unaware of it.

I believe decades are useful measures of time, and when we complete a decade of something important in our lives, it is time to sit back and take stock. Today I would like to share with you some of my reflections on Christian ministry at the 30 year mark. My purpose is not to call undue attention to myself but to invite you to join me in reflecting on your own sense of God's calling in your life and your place in God's greater plan for Creation.

Beginnings

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died (2 Cor 5.14, NIV)

The central driving force that motivates the Apostle Paul to complete his calling is the love of Christ. This includes both Christ's love for Paul, as demonstrated supremely in the Cross, and Paul's response of love for Christ. I can think of no higher or purer motive for living one's life, regardless of one's specific calling. You and I may not have the same vocational call, but we can share the same core motivation: our love for Christ. In our relationship with God, the initiative is always God's, and our actions are always a response. This is why gratitude and humility characterize the life of faith.

I was about 15 years old when God called me into the Christian ministry. I was a serious believer. I carried my Bible to school and read it between classes. Just a typical teenager! ☺ I had a group of friends who were also committed to Christ and we witnessed to others, much to their annoyance, of course. My kids would be so embarrassed!

I was also serious about what I was going to do as an adult. I wanted to be a medical doctor. The high school science teacher encouraged me, but I did not want the decision to just be mine. I wanted to know that it was what God wanted for me.

One evening I was alone reading in the family room. Then a voice totally interrupted my train of thought. It was an inner voice, not an outer voice, but it was as if someone else were standing there. I knew immediately whose voice it was, although God had never spoken to me that way before...or since. The voice said: "*Mark, be a preacher.*" It's funny how the voice matched West Texas idiom.

I put my book down and said to the Presence: *"I'll think about it."* This response may sound strange to you, but I perceived the call as an invitation, not as a command. Without saying anything to anyone, I spent two weeks praying about and considering my response. I finally shared it with my Dad, and the first thing he said to me was:

"Make sure it is God calling you and that you are not merely following in my footsteps. Then when you are sure, write your Grandma and we'll announce it to the church. "

I'm sure the letter to Grandma, his mother, reflected his own experience.

Shortly afterwards I was sure, and I wrote my Grandma and I stood before the local church to announce that God was calling me to Christian ministry. And now I've been traveling the road for 30 years.

My story of beginnings personalizes the Apostle Paul's words.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. ¹⁷ So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor 5.16-17)

Calling and Vocation

At first I expected my life to mirror my Dad's. I would become a local pastor in the Northwest Texas Conference and spend my career there. I never conceived of living in a foreign country or becoming a professor. God knows better than to let us see the whole picture at the beginning. God only lets us see pieces of it; just enough to entice us to go a little farther down the road.

I am not going to share my entire travelogue with you today, but I never expected to major in Spanish, to spend a year abroad, to fall in love with a girl from Up North (Hamburg, New York), to get a doctor's degree and teach in seminary in two countries other than the US. I certainly never dreamed I would live over 20 years outside my home country.

Through my experience I have come to believe that every human being has a divine calling. That calling resides in the core person that God made, but may have many different vocational expressions. To put it another way, God has a purpose for each one of us, and that purpose is connected to the specialness of each individual. You are God's gift to the world, and that gift may be used in many ways. Discovering ourselves and our calling are part of one and the same process. God's vision for us is not contrary to our fundamental identity but is hardwired into our lives. We don't have to fear discovering God's plan for our lives, because that plan is part of our very being.

Sometimes people are afraid to discover God's will, because they are afraid it will turn their lives upside down. It will somehow deny them things they really

want. They see God as a big killjoy who delights in denying their personal hopes, dreams and desires. But this vision is all wrong. God's will may turn your life upside down. I wanted to be a doctor, and now I am one, but I can't prescribe medicine! ☺ If our encounter with God's will does upset us and turn our world upside down, then what awaits us on the other side of obedience is genuine self-discovery and true fulfillment. We will eventually get to that "Aha" moment of realization that our lives are in harmony with God, with others and with our core humanity made in God's image.

Now this individual calling that is hardwired into our person may be lived in a great variety of ways. More than one vocation may be an expression of your calling. When God called me to preach, I thought I would be a local pastor the rest of my career. It wasn't until my last year of seminary studies that I begin to perceive something in me that desired further education. Pursuing my calling has taken me in different directions than I first perceived, but each new path I have taken has been in line with the fundamental calling.

What about you? Have you found your true, God-given self? Do you have a clear sense of your own calling? Some of you may be confused because you have been equating your vocation and your calling. What you do is not your calling, it is your vocation. Your calling has to do with who you are, and what you do flows out of your basic personhood. Some resist God's call in their lives, because they perceive that it means doing a particular vocation. "If I follow God's will he'll probably send me to the jungles of Africa as a missionary!" Well, if God sends you to the jungles of Africa as a missionary, it will be in line with who you really are. Diane and I have a friend who started out in seminary and ended up in the business world. This can be just as much a faithful response to God's calling as going to the jungles of Africa. Calling and vocation are distinct but complementary.

The Big Picture

We need to put our discussion of calling into a bigger context. Let's return to our text.

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (5.19).

We are connected to God's purpose both as individuals and as a community. The very purpose for having a people set aside as God's people is so that God may reveal God-self to the world and may redeem and reconcile the world. God seeks to achieve the divine creative purpose through us, and the driving vision of God's purpose is love.

This is one of the clearest verses in the Bible on the Incarnation. Jesus was not acting on his own. God is the protagonist in the salvation drama. God was active in Jesus, the Son of God, to take humanity's sin upon God-self and thereby remove the barrier to relationship. In Jesus God shows the depths of divine love and the incredible degree of identification with our human reality. It is precisely in Jesus' humanity where God empathizes with humanity's plight.

The Incarnation is tied to you and me as well. Each of us is a special creation, as I have already mentioned, and God wants to continue the work of reconciliation in and through us. Your calling is part of God's way of being and working in the world to complete the work of reconciliation begun in Christ. God was present in Christ in a unique, non-repeatable way. In Christ God let the world know that love is the core of the divinity, and God removed the curse of sin. But when Christ ascended he poured out the Holy Spirit, whom all who are in Christ have received. Now, Christ is present and working in and through us. Your calling, just as much as my calling, is part of God's redemptive, reconciling work in the world!

One of the big mistakes people make is to confuse a specific calling into the Christian ministry as the only "Christian" calling. While it is true that God sets aside certain persons to serve in ordained ministry, each person's calling can be Christian, even if it is expressed and lived through a so-called secular vocation. You can be an airline pilot, real estate agent, stay-at-home mom, diplomat or teacher and be just as much following a Christian calling as the one standing in the pulpit today.

What makes one's calling truly Christian is your connection to Jesus Christ and your faithfulness in following him. The Apostle Paul uses the metaphor of fragrance. *We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing (2 Cor 2.15)*. If we are faithfully following Jesus Christ in our calling, those around us will perceive Christ's presence in us.

Final Reflections

Now I would like to share just a few personal reflections on my 30 years in ministry. I have already alluded to one of the lessons I have learned. Obedience to one's calling brings fulfillment as a person and joy. God has not destroyed my life. God did not send me to the jungles of Africa, just to the European country closest to Africa! I could have become a medical doctor and been blessed by God in the process, but I believe that the path of genuine fulfillment has been saying yes to God, not just once 30 years ago, but repeatedly throughout life.

Related to this, following Christ for me is an open-ended adventure. When I first heard the voice I had a much more restricted understanding of God's will. I viewed it almost as a straight-jacket. Now that I have experienced various twists and turns in the road, most of which I believe were God's doing, I am much more relaxed about changes. To put it another way, God has a strange sense of humor, and I am sure that the last laugh is still to come!

During my pastoral ministry I have come to deeply respect and appreciate the depth of spirituality of people in the church. People often have the mistaken notion that the pastor or the missionary are spiritual giants, that we are more mature or we walk closer to God. Some pastors even delude themselves with this notion. It is a total falsehood. There is no connection between pastoral ministry and spiritual maturity or closeness with God. In each church I have served there are people who are closer to Christ, more faithful in their walk and more mature as believers. I just happen to be the person God put in the pulpit. I

can say the same about my seminary students. I am more specialized in my field, but they may be closer to Christ.

God has given me a precious gift, to serve in three different countries: Spain, Mexico and the US. This cross-cultural experience has opened my eyes to how much our understanding of faith and of how we are to live our faith is culturally conditioned. We can even confuse cultural elements as essentials of the faith and discredit another person's discipleship because we are seeing it through a particular cultural lens. Paul Tillich famously said: "*religion is the essence of culture, and culture is the form of religion.*"¹ He means that culture is a social crystallization of a society's core beliefs and self-understanding. Religion provides the ideological underpinnings or justification of our cultural forms.

We saw earlier that the Incarnation underlies our Christian calling, that is, our Christian way of being in the world. Therefore, it should not surprise us that Christ is present in culturally diverse ways throughout the world. After all, God is the source of both the limitless variety in Creation, and the underlying unity.

Finally, my wife Diane has accompanied me these 30 years of ministry. Her love, support and encouragement have kept me sane and on the path. She has been God's principle font of grace in my life. Also, she has made much greater sacrifices than I have. She has allowed my vocation to be primary and has had to endure years without substantial music in her life. It seems that God is now restoring that to her, for which I am grateful. Thank you Diane for your love and faithfulness!

Conclusion

Thirty years of ordained ministry, thirty years of preaching the Word, administering the Sacraments and maintaining church order. God's faithfulness and patient love, often expressed through other people, have enabled my faithfulness. Once again the Apostle Paul's words come to mind.

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3.4-6)

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died (2 Cor 5.14, NIV)

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May 31, 2009

¹ Cited from the Internet: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2521>. Accessed May 17, 2009.