

## ***Ministry as Vocation:***

### **Listen, God is Calling**

*Listen, listen God is calling  
Through the Word inviting!<sup>1</sup>*

During their very first week of seminary in late summer, I make it a point to sit with our incoming class members and ask them about their callings. “Why are you here in seminary?” is my question. After their first few days of intensive summer Greek boot camp, they’re already all asking themselves that question. In the throes of studying *Koine* grammar, some have begun to wonder if perhaps God reached a wrong number when they answered their call! But as my visit offers a brief respite from their regimen, they share freely. Their stories of how the call to ordained ministry or lay service was heard and heeded are inspiring. I leave those sessions confident about the future of our church.

Seldom is a seminarian’s call like that of Saul who was blinded on the road to Damascus, or like Moses who heard the voice of God as he paused by a burning bush. Rarely does the call come in a dramatic moment as it did for Jesus’ first disciples who dropped everything at his command to “Follow me.” No, for most of us the call to ministry comes more slowly, gently and ambiguously. Our calling is more akin to that of the two who walked beside the stranger on the road to Emmaus. They did not hear the call at first, nor did they recognize their holy caller. It was only later on, in the breaking of the bread at table, that they understood it was Jesus calling them to a new resurrection reality.

For over a quarter century, I have served in the church as one holding a “Letter of Call.” I’ve always felt in some measure unworthy of the call and unable to fulfill it adequately. But I’ve been sustained in my calls by members, colleagues and by God’s Spirit as I’ve turned again and again in prayer with the petition: “God, help me heed my call and steward it the best I can.”

### **WE ARE ALL CALLED**

One of the signal contributions of the Lutheran reformation was to radicalize the understanding of call. Not only are priests, bishops and the pope called by God, said Luther. Through baptism every Christian is ordained into a particular ministry. This notion of the “priesthood of all believers” goes hand-in-glove with our present emphasis on “ministry in daily life.”

Every Christian, be she pastor, physician, laborer or homemaker; every believer, be he in business, education or the military, is called by God. The very word we use to describe our occupation—vocation—comes from a Latin verb *vocare*, “to call.” In our daily vocations, and in our callings in the home and community, we carry out our ministries.

### **CALLS IN THE BIBLE**

Another good name for the Bible would be the Book of Calls! From Genesis to Revelation, there is one story of call and response after another. In the Garden of Eden, after all other creatures were brought forth, God called Adam and Eve into being. Our first forebears were called to be stewards, to name and tend the garden. When they failed in their stewardship by overstepping their boundaries, God reprovved and reissued the call to faithfulness on the other side of Eden.

Sometimes God's call seems preposterous. It must have been so for Noah who felt called to build an ark when it wasn't even raining! Just as Noah was called *into* the ark in faith, so he was called *out of* the ark when there was still water all around. God's call to exit the ark was coupled with a promise that never again would the divine response to human rebellion be worldwide retribution.

In the early forming of a people to journey in pursuit of a promised land, God issued a call to Abraham and Sarah. Their call was to "go from your country and your kindred . . . to the land that I will show you." (Gen. 12:1 RSV) They were sent out without any destination programmed into their Global Positioning System! After a brief sojourn in the land of Canaan, when famine came, Abraham and Sarah were led into Egypt. Sometimes we too may be called to go, at other times to stay; on occasion to leave our present surroundings, or to settle more deeply into them. Practical matters like earning our daily bread often must be considered in pondering the where and when of a call.

Many of those whose calls are recorded in Scripture were at first unwilling, often because they felt unworthy. When called to be the great liberator, Moses protested, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex. 3:11 RSV) When the divine call came to Isaiah the prophet, he likewise protested: "Woe is me! For I am lost; I am a man of unclean lips." (Is. 6:6 RSV) Young Jeremiah's hesitancy when confronted with the vocational call to be a prophet was, "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." (Is. 1:6 RSV)

In the face of every protest, however, God stood firm in sounding forth the call. "I will be with you," was the Caller's redundant resounding promise in the face of the hesitant callee's excuses. And while reluctant at first, those called by God marshaled their courage and carried out their vocations. No figure in all of Scripture shines more brightly in this regard than Mary. While troubled at first by the angel's appearance declaring the nature of her vocation, Mary accepted her call and made her ordination promises: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38 RSV)

### **CALLED IN ALL CONDITIONS . . .**

In First Corinthians, the apostle Paul exhorts the early Christians, "Consider your calls, sisters and brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth . . ." (1 Cor. 1:26 RSV) Indeed, we are called in all conditions of life. Regardless of whether we are well educated or feel

ourselves unprepared, if we have great riches or find ourselves living with very limited resources, God is out to get us!

In my experience, it is often those who feel most unworthy of the call who can offer a great witness to their faith. The humble rural peasants and urban shantytown dwellers of Latin America have preached the most powerful sermons to me simply by their lives of faithful service and incredible generosity.

Among the Biblical characters whose response to Jesus' call I find most compelling is the Samaritan woman at the well. (John 4) This "woman with a past," as they say, found her voice even as she loaned Jesus her bucket. Because of her witness, "he told me all that I ever did," many of her neighbors came to faith in Jesus also.

### **AND AT ALL AGES AND IN ALL STAGES OF LIFE**

As I make my rounds of visits in congregations to tell the story of our particular institutional calling as a seminary of the church, probably the most frequently asked question is, "How old are your students?" My response is that God calls people to prepare for service as a pastor, diaconal minister, associate in ministry or theologically trained lay person at all ages and in all stages of life.

Our seminary student bodies include all sorts of interesting folks these days! Some come single, others married, some divorced or widowed; some with children, quite a few with grandchildren. Some are able to live on campus and study full-time; many are part-timers who must keep their day jobs and commute considerable distances.

Once again, however, I am quick to add that heeding the call of God by no means equates with going off to seminary. In fact, for some pastors and other church workers there comes a time to leave that particular calling and work in other arenas. At any point along life's journey, the call may come to move in a different direction. Or for many of us, the call is to continue in what we are doing, with a renewed sense of vocation and stewardship of our occupation, our families and friendships, as our God-given ministries.

### **CALLED COLLECTIVELY AS COMMUNITIES OF FAITH**

While it's important to reflect on our call as individuals, it's also important to be reminded that we are called as communities of God's faithful people. Over and over again in the New Testament epistles, St. Paul addressed himself to faith communities. He reminded and exhorted them to lean into and live up to their collective calling as the body of Christ.

So not only do I have a call and vocation, but my congregation has a mission. Congregations together in a community have a stewardship responsibility for their common geographical *parish*. A synod has a call given its particular context and challenges. And our entire church is called as part of the larger one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church to fulfill God's mission on earth.

Likewise, an organization or institution of the church is under God's call to fulfill its purpose. In the seminary where I serve, we have been about a process of prayerful discernment, resulting in the adoption of a long-range plan we've entitled, *Directions for the Decade*. While they may initially be intuitive and somewhat vague, calls emerge into specific and focused missions. "Go and do this, being thus and so along the way," is the usual nature of the divine calls reflected in the Bible. And the Biblical calls, while frequently issued initially to individuals, result in the mobilization of faith communities for the proclamation of the Word and for service in God's name.

## **THE STATUS OF CHURCH VOCATIONS**

While I have attempted in this article to reinforce our Lutheran (though certainly shared by other Christians) convictions about the priesthood of all believers, I would be remiss in my particular calling if I did not present a report on the need in our church for what Roman Catholics have long referred to as "vocations." We need more people in our seminaries and other centers of theological education preparing to serve on one of the church's rosters!

When the ELCA began its life in 1988, approximately 1,000 congregations were without a permanently called pastor. That number has now more than doubled.<sup>2</sup> Each year, the number of available seminary graduates are fewer than half those needed by congregations throughout the church. With today's average-aged pastor being 51, and a typical seminary graduate in her or his late 30's or early 40's, this clergy shortage will only grow in the years ahead if we do not prepare more leaders. Some creative efforts are underway in many places to meet the need with trained lay leaders. But the majority of congregations feel the need for an ordained minister to serve in partnership with the laity.

Even as we affirm every sister and brother in her/his calling, so we can encourage those we think have the gifts and graces for full-time ecclesial ministry to consider a possible call to serve as a pastor or on one of the church's lay rosters. "And how are they to hear without preachers? And how can they preach unless they are sent?" (Romans 10:14-15 RSV).

## **LISTEN, GOD IS CALLING YOU!**

The Bible begins with a call in the garden and ends with a vision of a holy city inhabited by those who respond to the Spirit's call, "Come!" Called at the beginning of our lives in Christ by the Alpha-call of baptism, we shall be called again at life's end by the Omega-call of the resurrection! In the meantime, let us be confident that each of us is called by God right where we are, as we are with all our gifts and gaffes, all our strengths and shortcomings. We are also called collectively as the community of the faithful. As you go about your daily duties, how exciting that you can share with others this witness: God is calling and no, it's not a wrong number!

*The Author: The Rev. Michael Cooper-White is president of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg.*

---

<sup>1</sup> *With One Voice*, Augsburg Fortress Publishers, Hymn # 712

<sup>2</sup> *Ministry Needs and Resources in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ELCA Division for Ministry 2000