

Vocational Training

In the Episcopal Church, you'll be happy to know, before someone is ordained, they have to undergo a "battery" of psychological tests. Most of these tests are scan-tron, fill-in-the-bubble type questions, followed by an interview with a psychologist. When I took the tests, I probably had to answer a thousand questions over the course of a day. There was one question, though, that I still remember. The question was, "Do you hear voices?" The psychologist asked me about it in our interview, to which I answered, "Of course I hear voices, why else would I be here, taking this test? I heard God's voice tell me to become a priest!" I am happy to say the bishop ordained me anyway.

I guess it helps that there are many other Christians, many famous Christians, in the history of the Church whose call stories involved hearing a voice speaking directly to them, telling them what God wants them to do. St. Paul was on his way to Damascus when he heard the voice of Jesus ask, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." St. Patrick, after escaping from slavery in Ireland, heard "the voice of the Irish" calling to him, "We appeal to you, holy servant boy, to return and walk among us." St. Augustine, in the midst of intense internal struggle, was told to pick up the Bible and when he did, he read a passage that cut him to the heart. St. Francis, living in a time of great decadence in the church, was told by God to "go and repair my house which is falling into ruins." The idea of people hearing the voice of God has also been a popular set-up for movies like "Oh God!" and "Bruce Almighty," which are all about individuals who are visited by visions or voices of God.

Hearing stories like these, we can easily get caught up in the dramatic way God called these people and forget the fact that we are all called by God. Not everyone hears the audible voice of God. Most people find sufficient guidance from God in Scripture, in prayer, in the words of fellow Christians, and maybe (once in a blue moon) in a sermon. Some of us, though, need God to be a little less...subtle. We need the spiritual equivalent of a 2x4 upside the head to recognize what it is God wants us to do. That's why, I figure, God talks to some people directly—not because we're special, but rather because we're too thick-headed to get it with anything less! But whether or not God speaks directly to us or uses other, less drastic means, the point is that we are all called by God. Not just saints, monks, and clergy-types, but all of us.

God's calling comes to us in different ways. But it comes to us first as an invitation, an invitation to know Jesus. In our gospel lesson, Philip tells Nathaniel that he has found the messiah and invites him to come see for himself. "Come and see." That is what Philip says to Nathaniel, and it is also what Jesus said to two other disciples a few verses before the ones we read. "Come and see." God's call begins as an invitation to come and see Jesus and to see God working through him.

You see, the God who calls us is not some remote deity, far removed from the world. God didn't just wind up the world like a clock, stand back and let it go. God has been active throughout history, in the calling of Abraham and the forming of Israel, in speaking through the prophets, and supremely in the Incarnation, God becoming flesh in Jesus. And God is still active in the church, continuing the work that Christ began. Indeed, when God calls a person to know Jesus, it is a call to come and to see him at work in the world through the church. That is where popular portrayals of people hearing God's voice get it wrong. God doesn't call someone to do things for God without also calling them into

relationship with him and with his people. There is no “God and me,” only “God and us,” “God and the Church.”

If God’s call comes first as an invitation to see what God is doing, God’s call comes to us secondly as a call to get involved in what God is doing. Come and see, then come and do. In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus tells Philip to “follow him.” Literally, this means to go with someone. But in Jesus’ day, to follow someone also meant to follow after them metaphorically, in the sense of becoming their student, their disciple. There is an old Jewish saying that went “Follow the rabbi, drink in his words, and be covered with the dust of his feet.” The idea being that if you were a student, you would be following your teacher so closely that you’d be covered in the dust they kicked up as they walked along. To follow a rabbi, a teacher, meant that you were following in his footsteps, so to speak, doing what the rabbi does, being his apprentice. The call to “follow” Jesus is a call to apprentice ourselves to him, to do what he does, to continue the work Jesus began.

This is a rather amazing thing, if you think about it. God, the Creator of the Universe, the Lord of All, not only allows us to be involved in his work, his business, but invites us to do it! God shares his work with us, actually delegates some of what he is doing *to us!* Talk about taking a risk! No wonder we think God must only call holy people, and not clay-footed sinners like us. Yet, if we look at the biblical record, we see that the people God calls rarely start out as paragons of virtue. Moses was a murderer, Jacob a swindler, and Jonah tried to run away. Among the apostles, Nathaniel, we saw, was a sarcastic wise-guy, Matthew was a tax-collector, a collaborator in Rome’s oppression of Israel. Peter was always putting his foot in his mouth, and Judas...well, we know what happened with him. Even St. Paul was, as a professor of mine used to say, a Middle Eastern terrorist, seeking out Christians to preside over their execution. Not exactly “the best and brightest.” But God called them and involved them in his plan of salvation. Just as God calls each and every one of us to be involved in his work, to carry out his Gospel mission.

While some of us happen to carry out our part of the mission in the church, among other Christians, the *vast majority* of Christians are called to serve God, to minister the Gospel, *in the world*. The primary ministry of most Christians, those not wearing collars, is *out there* in the world, beyond the doors of the sanctuary, in daily life—at the office, in the marketplace, and at home, in the voting booth and the soup kitchen, in prison and in the PTA. God calls Christians to be in the world, working to bring good news to those who haven’t heard it. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, put the point directly: “The church is the one organization that exists for the sake of those who are not its members.”

I know what you’re probably thinking, This is all nice, high and holy talk, but how does it help us in the real world? What guidance does it offer the college student trying to decide on a major or a career, or the recent retiree trying to figure out what to do with their extra time now that they no longer have to work? How does it help us sort out God’s voice from the other voices telling us what we should do, the voices of society, the superego, and self-interest?

The best wisdom I have found comes from the Christian author Frederick Buechner. Buechner writes:

“By and large a good rule for discerning God’s calling on our lives is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you’ve missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b),

but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a), but probably aren't helping your patients much either. Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."¹

"Where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." For one person, that might mean they *live* to see the delight in others' faces when they bring leftover pastries to residents of a retirement community. For another, it might mean they find their purpose in life working as an advocate for abused elderly. For yet another, it might mean bringing a little beauty into the ugly world by planting and tending a flower garden. There are a myriad of ways in which we can respond to the call to be involved in God's mission, countless ways in which we can contribute to God's saving work.

Buechner's understanding of vocation applies to individuals, but also to churches. Churches cannot be all things to all people, even the big, thousand-plus member churches. Sure, there are things that churches need to do in order to be a church, but not every church has to have a homeless ministry or young mothers' group or young adult ministry. Each church has a vocation, a calling to share in God's work in a particular way.

So what is our vocation here at Good Shepherd? Where does our deep gladness meet the world's deep hunger? What is it that we do well that the world hungers for? How is God calling us to participate in God's saving work? That is the primary question we have to answer. All the other questions we will be discussing next week at the Annual meeting—questions of money, staffing, facilities, etc.—follow in line after that primary question.

An important thing to keep in mind as we discern God's call for us now is the understanding that our calling as individuals or as a congregation may change, evolve, over time. I mean, Good Shepherd is not the same congregation it was thirty, twenty or even ten years ago. Richmond and the wider world are not the same as they used to be either. Think of all that has changed politically, economically, religiously just in the past four years. It was just four years ago that Covid erupted. How has our view of ourselves and of our mission as a church evolved in that time? How has our understanding of our calling changed to address these new realities?

One thing we can be certain about is that seeking God's will, living responsively to God's calling is an ongoing process. We can never say we have fulfilled our calling and sit back and rest on our accomplishments. A friend of mine, who retired from 30-plus years as a school principal, tells me every time he sees me that he retired from being a principal, but nowhere does it say that one ever retires from Christian service. Since retirement, he has been licensed as a lay chaplain at a hospital and became a deacon. His career may have ended but his call to serve hasn't.

The call to know Jesus, to follow him, to be involved in his work in the world is still our calling, as it is the vocation of every Christian, indeed every person. It is a calling that remains with us throughout our life, calling us into greater and greater participation in God's marvelous work. When we reach the end of our days and our earthly labors are done, God will give us one last call, the call to come home. When that time comes, we will be called home to be with our Lord, to enjoy eternity with him and his people, as we await the renewal of the whole creation.

¹ Frederick Buechner, "Vocation," *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, revised and expanded (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993), 118-9.

Until that day, our vocation continues to be to come to Jesus and then do as he does. That is a calling that makes us who we are, that gives us purpose and that challenges us to grow. We give thanks today that our God is a God who speaks, who reveals himself to us, who invites us into his service, into his life-transforming activity in the world. We wouldn't be who we are without that call. Amen.