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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
January 21, 2024
Epiphany 3

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

So sisters and brothers in Christ, I don't know how it happens.

I am not sure of the exact process.

If I did, I would bottle it and sell it.

If I did, I would patent it.

What am I talking about?

None other than the means by which someone hears and faithfully responds to the call of God.

Now the apostle Paul would tell us that the call comes by the Word of God.

Someone must speak the Word of God, and lo and behold the person listening responds in faith.

Paul says, "How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?"

"How are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?"

But how is that possible, that someone listens and responds?

Except by the power of the Spirit.

The Spirit rides the word and enters the heart and a person comes to believe and to respond.

This is how the call and the response works.

But personally, I still don't fully understand it.

I still don't fully grasp it.

For sometimes people don't respond to the call from God.

And we are told then that well, the Spirit works when and where it chooses.

I don't know what that means either.

Sometimes it takes repeating the call, like it did with Jonah.

The first time God called to Jonah, he went in the opposite direction of where he was directed to go, that is to Nineveh over here in the east (point on the left hand).

Jonah, though, hopped on a boat toward Tarshish, way to the west in Spain (point on the right hand), about as far as one could go from Nineveh.

So, sometimes the call has to be repeated.

And only after the second time did Jonah go as he was directed by God.

Why? I don't know.

And then there are times when people respond instantaneously to God's call, like the disciples in our Gospel reading.

Jesus says, "Follow me," and immediately Simon and Andrew, James and John, left everything and followed.

Why they dropped everything and followed Jesus? I don't know.

But, they did.

So, no, I don't know how it happens.

I am unsure of the exact process.

But the call that comes upon a person, the call that comes upon us, has the power to change us, to redirect us, to move us in the most mysterious ways.

PAUSE

Case in point. I was not planning to become a pastor growing up.

That had never entered my mind as a young person growing up.

I thought I was going to be a veterinarian.

In fact, when I went off to college, I began my studies as pre-vet.

And so, I had classes in biology and organic chemistry, and the like.

But it soon became apparent that this was not my calling.

And I shifted towards English literature, and I thought that maybe I would become an English professor.

But then, it so happened, that I was home from college on break, and the pastor from my home church asked if I would like to go for lunch.

And we did, and she asked me in the midst of our conversation, if I had ever thought of becoming a pastor.

Well, I told her, “No way.” I said, “I had no desire to become a pastor.” That in fact, she must be thinking of someone else.

But, she told me that she recognized gifts in me that would serve well in the ministry.

PAUSE

Now, I came home from that lunch still convinced that my pastor had the wrong person in mind.

But then something strange happened. Her words started to work on me.

And I went back to college, and I started thinking more and more about what she said.

Now at the time, I was very involved in Lutheran Campus Ministry at college, so I was around other Lutherans all the time.

And Lutheran Campus Ministry was led by two Lutheran pastors as well as an intern from seminary.

And the pastors and intern had regular conversations with us college students about what the ministry was like.

Additionally, I also began thinking about my time growing up in my home church, how I was deeply involved in youth group, how I befriended an elderly member of our church, and by the invitation of the pastor had agreed to drive him to church each week, so on and so forth.

And I realized that my pastor was right. She had seen something in me, gifts for ministry, that I had not noticed myself.

And to this day, I would argue that my pastor gave me perhaps the best gift that anyone could give another person.

She had shown me who I should be in life.

Indeed, that is maybe the best gift a person can give to another person—to recognize how God is calling someone to live their life.

For young people, it is truly life alternating, when a friend, or a teacher, or a mentor, a pastor, or some other significant person in one's life...

It is truly life altering when that significant person in one's life shows you the path you are to walk throughout life.

Again it may be the greatest gift one person can give to another.

PAUSE

Now this is all by way of saying that hearing a call from God often happens through the voice of another person.

It probably isn't going to be the case that we come across a burning bush, like Moses, and hear God calling to us.

It probably isn't going to be the case that the angel Gabriel is going to visit us, like Mary, and hear God calling to us.

No, miraculous visions aside, God often calls to us through the voice of other people.

Someone might say to us, "I need you to do such and such."

And that could be God calling to us.

Someone might say to us, "Have you considered doing such and such?"

And that could be God calling to us.

And in those moments we have to pause and reflect to see if indeed we are being called.

Sometimes it might not be God calling to us.

So knowing when to say “Yes” or “No” to a calling is the challenge, right?

For how do we know it is God’s calling to us?

PAUSE

So here is a particular tool for us to help discern God’s call.

And the tool is this.

Gifts for a particular calling in life and joy in fulfilling that call should go hand-in-hand.

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Now sometimes we may not have the gifts to do a particular ministry, even though we think that that is exactly what we should be doing, particularly because we may feel the calling gives us joy.

And so we find ourselves unable to fulfill that calling because we just aren’t right for it. We don’t have the gifts.

And sometimes we may have the gifts to fulfill a particular calling, but fulfilling that particular calling would give us no joy in life whatsoever.

And the calling would be a burden upon our lives.

And so, again let me reiterate, gifts for a particular calling in life and joy in fulfilling that call should go hand-in-hand.

Now, not always.

Sometimes we are called to tasks that don’t sustain perpetual joy in our lives.

Sometimes we are called to tasks that may lead to suffering.

This is to be expected, as Christ himself suffered in his calling.

But overall, joy should accompany our callings in life, whatever those callings may be—in our careers, in our volunteer and service work, in our family lives, so on and so forth.

Joy and the ability to do well our calling should go hand-in-hand.

Finally, then I want to highlight one very, VERY important point about our callings.

And it has to do with what Martin Luther had to say about Christians in general, but certainly applies to all people.

Luther said that we, Christians, and like I said, all people are part of what is called the “priesthood of all believers.”

And what that means is that all our callings whatever they be, all are equal in the eyes of God.

No pastor, nor priest, nor any clergymen or clergywomen has any greater standing with God just because they are clergy.

Now this is what HAD been taught at the time of Martin Luther, that priests WERE of a higher order.

That priests served as the go-between for people and God.

That priests were somehow then closer to God.

But Luther dismissed this idea.

Instead, Luther said that clergy persons simply have a vocation, a calling, like everyone else in the world.

We have been given particular gifts to function as religious leaders.

But that doesn’t make us better than anyone else.

And so, what we see is with this concept of the “priesthood of all believers” Luther leveled the playing field, so that all people’s vocations, all people’s callings are of equal importance.

Every calling is “holy”, if in fulfilling our call, we give glory to God.

So whether we be a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher...

Whether we be a janitor, a trash collector, a cleaning person...

Whether we be a car salesperson, an electrician, a snow plow driver...

Whether we be a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, a son or daughter, a brother or sister—for these too are callings...

Whatever our calling may be, if in fulfilling our call, we give glory to God, then that calling is holy.

PAUSE

So, circling back to where we started this sermon about “callings,” I don’t know how it happens.

I am not sure of the exact process.

All that can really be said is the call of God is mysterious.

We hear a voice, perhaps an inner voice, but all the more powerfully the voice of another person, and the Spirit works on our hearts, and we suddenly find ourselves pursuing a calling.

And if it brings us a sense of joy, and if we have gifts to fulfill this calling well...

And if in the process of fulfilling our call, we give glory to God...

Then such a calling is holy, such a call is God-ordained.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.