
BEING BEFORE DOING

How many of you feel called? Called to what you do?

- That's what I want to focus on today: the call.
 - Except not just *your* call, but *the* call, GOD'S call to each and every one of us.

First, let's look at this very eventful passage from the Gospel of Matthew.

- It starts off rather darkly, with John's imprisonment by Herod that, seems to spark JESUS' retreat to the backwaters of Capernaum in Galilee.
 - But lest you think that JESUS is just trying to put some distance between HIMSELF and Herod, Matthew makes it clear that all of these events are in tune with GOD'S plan of redemptive activity:
 - *Galilee of the Gentiles—the people living in darkness have seen a great light.*

The fulfillment of GOD'S plan begins in Galilee.

- It is from this off-the-beaten-path place that JESUS proclaims the coming of the kingdom of GOD and invites those listening to turn around (to repent) and receive this kingdom.
- Then HE begins gathering together HIS own rabbinic school of disciples,
 - and demonstrates the kingdom HE'S been proclaiming by teaching, preaching and healing.

If you're looking for it, you will find that the sense of calling permeates this passage.

- The call to John the Baptizer is there, even though that calling leads to imprisonment and later death.
- The withdrawal of JESUS to Galilee is an intentional move to give HIM intentional time to listen and respond to GOD'S call.
- Then there is the call of JESUS to the crowds to recognize and become part of GOD'S in-breaking kingdom.
- And of course, there is the call of JESUS to a few fishermen to become HIS disciples and catch-up people in the net of GOD'S love.

Do you feel called?

Some of you have heard me tell how when I was twelve, I was found to have a tumor on the base of my brain.

- Diagnostic surgery was called for.

The day of the surgery where the surgeon would open up my head and examine this tumor, I rested on gurney in a small room waiting for an orderly to roll me into the operating room.

- As I lay there with my eyes closed, I felt a hand on my arm.
 - Thinking it was the orderly, come to get me, I opened my eyes, but though I could still feel that firm hand, no one was there.
 - I immediately knew that it was JESUS, ready to go with me into that surgery and beyond.
- Many years later, I came to understand that event as more than a moment of reassurance.
 - It was JESUS, calling me. But let me say more about that later.

While this calling was for me to be a pastor, let me make it clear that there are different kinds of callings.

- Some years ago, the Lilly Endowment did a study on vocation.
 - The research team found that, while most seminary graduates have a clear sense of "vocation" and "calling" that brings them to the ministry of preaching and teaching,
 - very few of the people in the pews actually feel called.
 - Very few of them believe that what they do with most of their time matters to GOD and the church, or makes a particular difference in the world.

I think one reason for this might be our tradition of referring only to clergy as being called.

- Perhaps if more people felt, or the church did a better job of lifting up the direct connection between what people do and who people are, there would be a more universal sense of calling among all of CHRIST'S followers.
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Martin Luther wanted to convey this idea that all Christians are called when he talked about the priesthood of all believers:

- that, not just the clergy, but all are called to share the good news of GOD'S love in everything they do.

On one occasion, Luther explained that sense of Christian vocation this way:

- *"The Christian shoemaker does his or her duty, not by putting little crosses on the shoes, but by making good shoes, because GOD is interested in good craftsmanship."*
 - Each of us is to serve as best we are able wherever GOD places us and to recognize that this service is a calling from GOD.
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Again, perhaps there is a gap for us between what we do and who we are.

- Maybe that sense of calling is less about what we do and more about who we are.
 - GOD'S calling to each of us isn't simply to do something, but rather to be something, namely, a child of GOD.
 - Maybe being comes before doing.
 - Maybe being even makes doing possible.
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I promised that I would tell the rest of the story of that calling from GOD that I received.

- Jump forward eight years from the time of that surgery to when I was in college.
 - (Yes, eight years. I never said I was the sharpest tool in the shed.)
- While majoring in business administration, I was active in the Lutheran Campus Ministry program at Fresno State.
 - One day, our campus pastor asked me to think specifically about the gifts that GOD had given me—talents and abilities that made me who I am.
 - This was a question about being, about who it was and is that GOD created me to be.
 - Then our pastor asked me to consider where I might best use those gifts.
- Suddenly that visit from JESUS in the hospital came back to me, and I now understood that JESUS was not only walking with me into surgery.
 - HE was also calling me to follow HIM as a minister of Word and Sacrament.

I used to worry about telling that story because there might be people who were considering ordained ministry for themselves, but who had not had an experience like that.

- Then a friend told me how, while playing a concert, he heard the voice of GOD from a church across the street dramatically calling him away from being a concert pianist and, instead, to being a pastor.
 - He finished his story by saying, "Isn't it wonderful that many people can find their calling without having to get hit over the head with a 2x4?"
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Perhaps what made it possible for John to do the proclaiming of the coming of the MESSIAH and challenge the powers that be, even when it meant imprisonment, is that he knew that GOD had called him to be the forerunner.

- Maybe what inspired such an immediate response from Peter and Andrew, James and John was that they felt called to be more than they had imagined.

- They probably had no idea what “fishers of people” even meant, but they did know that JESUS saw something in them, something of value and worth beyond just what they were doing,
 - and that this something meant that they were to be HIS disciples and trust that the rest would become clear as they spent time with HIM.
- And it could be that Zebedee, James’ and John’s father, hearing that same call knew that it was not for him to be a disciple, because he was to be one who continued to bring in the fish that filled the stomachs of others,
 - but now also to be the one that looked after the families of these fishers of men, while they answered a different calling from GOD.

You see, Christians, callings are not about who does the most important thing, or the best thing, or the biggest thing.

- Callings are about doing whatever we do because of who we are, children of GOD.

When my cousin started college, I asked her what she was going to study.

- She told me that she was going to college to find a husband, because she wanted to be a wife and a mother.

My question to her was about doing.

- And while it would have been easy to say, “just a wife and a mother,” her response reflected a strong sense of being, of knowing who GOD was calling her to be.
 - And she’s a great wife and mother!

Every one of us is called—called to be a child of GOD, even if you don’t quite know what that means.

- But know that on a very basic level, being a child of GOD means that GOD values and honors and loves you.

And if you are truly open to being GOD’S child, and discovering what that means for you, over time, you will also find all kinds of things to do in response to GOD call.

- Maybe the “doing” will come through your work.
- Maybe it will come through your volunteering.
- Perhaps you will find it in your home or in your neighborhood, or in your church, or even in someplace you have yet to visit.
 - My guess is that most of your “doing”—that is, living out your calling in word and deed—will come through relationships.

Know this, though: how ever it is that GOD might use you, it is important to remember that before GOD calls you to do anything, GOD first calls you to be something: GOD’S own beloved child.

- And knowing this, you can trust that the rest will follow.

Let me also say that this calling isn’t only for individuals.

- It is also for groups and communities and nations.
 - Remember that when GOD made the covenant with Israel, GOD told them that they would be blessed to be a blessing;
 - that their relationship with GOD was not just for themselves, but was to be beneficial to other groups and communities and nations.

And this calling is also for congregations.

- Last week I invited you to consider what particular need our congregation might be able to meet,
 - and to allow that sense of calling to shape the year to come.
 - I also suggested that perhaps that need might be to simply provide a place for people to belong.
- But before thinking about what we are called to do as a congregation, we must remind each other what we are called to be.
 - We have been called by GOD to be a gathering of GOD'S beloved children.
 - We have been called by GOD to be a community of welcome and acceptance.
 - We have been called by GOD to be place where GOD'S word is taught, the good news is proclaimed, and all may find healing.
- As we think about what we may want to get busy and do, let us first focus on being—just being—GOD'S beloved children,
 - and then let that grace-filled identity seep into the deepest parts of ourselves.
 - As we do that, I have no doubt that those things that we are called to do will become clear in time.
- All of us are much more than just what we do.
 - We are GOD'S children, holy and dearly loved,
 - and we are called—called to be a vital part of the kingdom of GOD.