

## ENCOURAGERS AND CALLINGS

Let us pray...

### *In the Morning*

This is another day, O Lord. I know not what it will bring forth, but make me ready, Lord, for whatever it may be. If I am to stand up, help me to stand bravely. If I am to sit still, help me to sit quietly. If I am to lie low, help me to do it patiently. And if I am to do nothing, let me do it gallantly. Make these words more than words, and give me the Spirit of Jesus. Amen. (BCP Page 461)

Everything changed for Jesus when he heard that John the Baptist had been arrested. He immediately withdrew to Galilee where he began exercising his vocation, calling together a new community. John seems to have known that this transition was coming. Prior to his arrest he said, "I must decrease and he must increase."

I suspect Jesus also recognized a transformation in his calling, a reaffirmation of what he experienced at his baptism and in his journey quest in the wilderness. John was a spiritual brother of Jesus. When someone of great importance in our lives dies, new things await us. When there is death there is also hope. Jesus recognizes that with John's departure his ministry is really beginning.

Today's gospel continues with Jesus calling brothers Peter and Andrew and James and John to leave their fisherman's way of life. Jesus calls and they respond immediately, leaving everything familiar behind and setting out for places they had never imagined. While all this involved a dramatic uprooting, there must have been comfort in the fact that Jesus called them in pairs. Throughout what lay ahead they would remain brothers even as they gained a deeper sense of brotherhood and sisterhood.

In the story, they respond to Jesus' call dramatically and decisively. I don't know about you but it is a little hard for me to relate to the alacrity of their response. I can see myself saying, "It sounds like a great opportunity, Jesus, but I have to finish mending these nets. Will you be coming this way tomorrow?"

Sometimes just getting out of bed on a cold, bleak January morning feels like as much of a calling as I can muster. Yet, once I am up on my feet, usually things pick up and I have a clearer sense of direction. I discern right away that I am next called to ... brush my teeth!"

Many of us don't have a "road to Damascus" conversion experience. I am a little skeptical about professions of thunderbolt conversions. Yet I recognize that we are called in different ways. There may be pivotal moments in our lives when windows and doors are opened and grace happens, and we see a new way ahead.

Kate Perry, a Baptist minister, writes of her struggle with people asking her

about her calling.

As a recent graduate of Seminary she describes the pressure she feels from other peoples' inquiries, as if the inquirers themselves need her to have a certainty they want for themselves. She writes, "'To what area of ministry do you feel called?' is quite possibly the worst question I've ever been asked, and I'm asked it a lot. The first time I heard it, I didn't have a concise answer...

The question wouldn't be so awful", she continues," if it didn't sound so final. I could handle "To what area of ministry do you feel called next?" Calling is more about the journey, about living for living's sake, not some reward."

When I was at Virginia Seminary there was a common and sometimes breezy expectation that one was there because God had called one to be there, most likely to become an ordained priest. This is not exactly what I thought I was doing there. I considered myself an explorer and so found this expectation of god-sent calling to be intimidating.

Was I called? What did that mean? How would I get through all the hurdles and evaluations of the ordination process if I did not have a calling that was loud and clear? Sometimes God whispers. How could I stay honest and still make progress in what I perceived to be the norms of the church?

While I was uneasy with these questions at the time, I see now that they were helpful. Although I did not always swallow the evangelical morsels, chewing on them broadened my appreciation of the gifts of others. Keeping the door open for questions also provided a gateway for the Spirit.

Again, Kate Perry: "Some people seem to have a natural sense of direction, knowing exactly which way to go and when. But most of us find it a challenge to know exactly what our purposes are."

For me, vocation is an evolutionary process. It is alive and conscious. Conversion is a journey in which we sometimes see spectacular vistas and press on with clarity. Other times we stumble through deep darkness and labor up steep paths. But we are moving, not static. Jesus' own journey changed as he went further along. When he called the fishermen I doubt that he foresaw Gethsemane and the cross.

A movie I saw recently, "Marvelous Moments", illustrates the mystery and open-endedness of calling and vocation. It depicts the life of a Swedish working class family in the early 1900s. Maria is a hard working mother of six children. She is married to a sometimes delightful but more often difficult and abusive man. She suffers a great deal but embraces her calling as loving mother and part-time provider as a seamstress.

She is strong. She soldiers on, rising to meet the needs of each day and always looking out for her beautiful children.

One day, or, once upon a time, while going through the contents of a small

chest, she discovers a camera that had apparently been forgotten. Because times are hard she takes it to the local photography studio to inquire about its value. The owner, a kind man, sees something in Maria that no one else has identified, including herself. He gives her a plate for the camera and tells her to go out and take a picture. She does, catching a whimsical moment with her children on the couch.

When she returns the plate to be developed what she sees lights up her face with wonder and delight. Her mentor gives her more plates and darkroom equipment and keeps encouraging her. When she discovered the camera in the closet, she also discovered a gift. She had a good eye for composition, light and rare moments. Friends and neighbors started coming to her to have their pictures taken.

Frederick Buechner writes, "The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." So it was with Maria. Her husband felt threatened and did everything he could to thwart her. But she held her ground. She carried her cross and would not surrender her camera.

As clearly as Jesus called the fishermen, so also she had found a calling. She had not entered into a spiritual formation process at seminary to attain this, but she discovered that she had a gift that brought great satisfaction to her as well as wonderment to others. The role of her encourager was essential to the development of her gift.

When has someone seen something in you, a gift theretofore undisclosed? What gifts lie waiting to be discovered? Sometimes it takes others to recognize our gifts and prod us towards their development. Communities such ours are places where we may identify and encourage the gifts of others. We come to appreciate that we too have gifts that our faith community needs and values. "Getting involved in a purposeful way is the adrenalin that flows to our unknown strengths." (William Oakley)

The pain and drudgery of Maria's life did not disappear, but she had found a calling that gave her purpose, vitality and joy.

The four disciples called in today's gospel did not know where they were going, who Jesus was, and what he wanted from them. They stumbled and followed, constantly misunderstood him but continued to follow, found someone they loved and followed, questioned and often failed to grasp the answers...and kept following.

These Galilean fishermen had no education but what the sea had taught them, which was probably a lot. Jesus saw something in them that perhaps no one else had seen, valued or loved. I would not be here today if people in Deborah's and my families and our faith community had not seen something in me that I could not see. I am thankful to those encouragers who over the years have seen, affirmed and loved me into a deeper awareness of who I am and what I have to offer. I'll pause here before this starts to sound like an Oscar acceptance speech.

Still, I am grateful. And I believe that a community such as ours is most vibrant when we love forth the gifts that are in each of us.

I want to close with a verse from a song by John bell called *The Summons*.

“Lord your summons echoes true  
when you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you  
And never be the same.  
In your company I’ll go  
Where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I’ll move and live and grow  
In you and you in me.”

### **Matthew 4:12-23**

<sup>12</sup>Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup>He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup>so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: <sup>15</sup>“Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— <sup>16</sup>the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.” <sup>17</sup>From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

<sup>18</sup>As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup>And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” <sup>20</sup>Immediately they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup>As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. <sup>22</sup>Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.