

“Where Your Deep Gladness Meets the World’s Needs”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:18-25

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Have you ever felt called to do something? Called into action, into speech, into silence, into relationship? Called by a person or a group or a movement of people? Called to a place, or from a place?

Baptists love talking about calling. When I first became a Baptist in college, with a bunch of peace activists and hippies being church together, I was kind of puzzled by this word, “calling.” It was kind of like when people would say they “heard the voice of God...” I wanted to believe them but I didn’t really get it. How can you feel called? How do you receive a calling? What do you do if you want to be called but you’re not hearing anyone reaching out? Even though I had a lot of questions and it seemed like the rest of the church did, too, people still used that language. A beloved saint, Al Carroll, said that he was “called” to do the weekly Peace Vigil on the corner of the town square. Another saint, Judy, would say that she felt “called” to send a card or email to a student and invite us over for dinner. Some people said they were “called” to take action when immigrants were threatened with deportation. So many different kinds of callings—each of them a little weird, a bit mystical, strange and deeply personal. It does no good to compare one person’s calling with another, because it is between that person and the Holy.

In Godly Play Sunday school, we say that “prophets are people who come so close to God and God comes so close to them that they know what God wants them to do.” And I think that’s a great explanation of calling. There is some closeness of heart and spirit to the Divine that leaves someone with a distinct feeling that they know what God wants them to do.

In our Bible study on Tuesday, our own congregant David Bloom remarked that he has felt only two or three moments of calling in his whole life. He described the experiences as a “mystical, non-rational moment of clarity; unbidden, unexpected, surprising.” And then he said that from those moments of knowing what was required of him by the Holy, he never looked back, he always moved forward, into social change ministry in the Seattle area.

Another word that people use to express a feeling of calling is “vocation.” Whereas “calling” may feel a little too evangelical, “vocation” is more accessible to some. Hear what Frederick Buechner says in his sweet book, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. He says, “Vocation: it comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done...” As

he continues, Buechner says that sometimes these kinds of work can get out of balance, where either you are fulfilling the desire of your heart but no one is really benefitting from it besides you; or where you are doing the work the world needs so intensely that you don't pause to be your own person. He remarks, "...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."

This was quoted a lot during my seminary education, and I find that a lot of progressive churches are taking this quote up as well. If we want to be good people, if we want to live into God's call of doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with Them, then how do we do it? Who are we called to be and what are we called to do?

I sometimes wonder what the disciples would think of this quote. What would Simon called Peter and Andrew and James and John think of Buechner's idea? After all, they were called to a new vocation in the midst of their daily work. What was on their heart that caused them to say "yes" and follow? Where did their deep gladness lie? Jesus was certainly inviting them to participate in a movement that would meet the world's deep hunger, a hunger for justice, a hunger for freedom from the oppressive Roman Empire, a hunger for spiritual revelations of life and love. But the Bible doesn't tell us that Peter wasn't satisfied with his fishing business, that Andrew was bored working at the seashore, that James and John didn't want to work for their dad Zebedee anymore. The Bible doesn't tell us that these first disciples were looking for a different way of life, or searching for something that would fill a chasm in their heart, or just trying to shake up their daily routine. Instead, the Bible tells us that in the moment that Jesus called to these men, they left their work and followed him.

I wonder how Jesus communicated to these fisher fellows that he was doing something wherein they would find gladness? That whatever was to come, it would be work that they most needed to do, work that they simply *couldn't not* do?

In our Thursday Bible study on Zoom, we talked about experiences that each of us have had of people that we would follow if they asked us. Some people told us of personalities that have a kind of electric, or magnetic quality to them such that they draw all eyes and ears, such that people can't help but pay attention to them. We also discussed the danger of charismatic leaders, who can, sadly, exploit their charisma and do much harm. We wondered at how the Peter, Andrew, James and John could instantly trust Jesus enough to follow him. After all, they didn't sit down with him and go over a contract, they didn't question what would happen to their families, they didn't compare their personal mission statements and lists of values to see if they could work together. In a commentary on this passage in *Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, Melinda A. Quivik says, in this story "Jesus is portrayed as a whirlwind of hope, turning those whom he called from their old ways to a new way with no promise of success, no mention of the overthrow of Rome, no army to free John the Baptist, no utopian scheme." There was a trust, a faith, a calling there at the seaside...and like so many prophets who came before them in the Hebrew tradition, Peter and Andrew and James and John said, "Yes, I'll go. Send me. I'll

follow.” And so they left their boats, and nets, and livelihood and place in the community and father and followed Jesus.

I’ve always loved this Bible story. It conveys that calling is a personal event—it's not in front of thousands of people, it is intimate. Sometimes moments of calling interrupt your daily work, cause you to pause your routine and leave things behind, disrupting your life. Sometimes you need a witness to the call, there with you and the Holy, someone who could check you and say “Hey, did you hear that? That sounds important” and reflect back to you the call. And sometimes calling can be a bit confusing, as when Jesus called these men to be “fishers of humankind.” What was that task like? Or was that call more about how they would be as a group? Jesus reveals that calling, or vocation, isn’t always about what you do, but about who and how you are.

This story reveals that the Holy takes the initiative—Jesus did not wait for the fishermen to seek him out or to chase him down. Jesus comes to them. And though sometimes we are used to hearing stories of a divine call being individually given, in this story, Jesus calls Peter and Andrew and James and John not only to follow him, but he calls them into community. He calls them as a group.

A week ago Saturday at the leadership retreat, members of last year’s and this year’s Council gathered to consider where they were being called as group—and what happens when you say “yes” to your church calling on you to serve! We revisited the Long-Range Plan from 2020, explored the values and guiding principles of our church, and wondered together about where the future might take us as we seek to follow the Way of Jesus together. Following the retreat, I found myself thinking about something that Rev. Doug Avilesbernal, our Executive Minister, said to the Council a few weeks ago: at SFBC we tend to be good at tasks, but sometimes we need to slow down and let our hearts catch up. In other words, we often ask “what are we called to DO?” but we need to ask “who are we called to BE?” as well. And that call to being, that understanding that vocation is a part of who we are, that is heart work.

What is our heart work today, church? Where does our deep gladness, or the work that we must do, meet the hunger of a world in need? What can we simply not live our lives without? How can we respond to the events in a complex, and disheartening, and heart-wrenching world in a way that lifts up the gospel causes of justice for all people and peace achieved through the presence of justice? How can we shape ourselves into individuals and into a community that prioritizes the wellbeing of the people on the margins, the people who are in close contact with the world’s deepest needs?

Friends, there is no simple answer. There is no magic wand or special sauce that we can use to receive a calling and know it is divine. But what we can do is reflect on what values are central to our lives. We can pay attention to the news, pay attention to what our youth care about, pay attention to the voices of those on the margins and listen to what they are saying when they call, “peace, peace, there is no peace!” We can watch closely for glimpses of the Divine showing up

and speaking to our loved ones, and reflect the Divine to them in a way that they may hear the call through us. We can make space in our lives for silence, for rest; space “in which another voice may speak,” as Mary Oliver wrote. We can open our chests and hold out our tender hearts so that we may be affected by the world, and not sequestered from it or immune to the goings on around us. We can let our heart break, and make sure that it breaks open, so that we can put our hearts together with others and say “yes” to following the call to proclaim resurrection and regeneration and love to a world with acute need.

For me, today, in ministry here with you, with the legacy of justice work all around us in this place of worship, I think the work we are called to is dismantling white supremacy and ending white Christian nationalism. The work is uprooting the aspects of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ethnocentrism, ableism and all the systemic oppressions that shape us as individuals and our communal lives as members of this church and as residents of Seattle and Washington and the USA. This work will break our hearts, perhaps already is breaking our hearts, but let it break us open so that something new and beautiful can grow in our community. “A new world is on its way,” the writer Arundhati Roy says, “and on a quiet day I can hear her breathing.” Well, friends, even on loud days with protestors in the streets of Memphis and mothers wailing as they are called to action by a young man crying for his mother, I can hear the new world calling out to us to be born—the new world is on its way, and the delivery certainly will be challenging, but we are called as followers of the Way of Jesus to leave our old ways of being, and join together in bringing forth new life. New life that can breathe freely, new life that knows equity and accountability, new life that flourishes without diminishing anyone else—a new world characterized by the deep and abiding love that moves us to care for each other and our neighbors.

Again, Melinda A. Quivik, says, “in this Gospel story, the disciples are not called to lead but to follow. They are not called to be the best, but to be together.”

May we go forward from this place opening ourselves to the call of the Holy, and may we go forward together to find the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep hunger. And when we find that place that we are called to, when we accept our vocation, may we take action.

May it ever be so. Amen.