

## Call Stories

January 30, 2011

Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Scripture:

Matthew 4:18-23

Matthew 5:1-12

After Jesus made his rounds at Presbyterian Hospital, he thought he would take a short walk. He turned down Fifth Street and saw a man standing in front of a red-brick church, and he said to him, "Follow me and I will make you part of something new."

The man turned to Jesus, saying: "Well, Jesus, funny you should ask. Lately, I have had my share of questions and doubts about organized religion." Jesus said, "Follow me and we will find the answers to those questions together."

Then Jesus saw a young woman he had known since she was baptized as a child and raised in the Presbyterian Church. Jesus said, "It's time for you to put all that you have heard and read and studied to work in the care and leadership of my people." And the woman said, "I am ready."

Jesus saw another young woman who had been baptized more recently and said. "I know you are thinking about your life and your role in my church. You have even considered going to seminary. (No, by the way, you are *not* crazy.) Come and serve the church as an elder and we will consider together whether I have more for you do to after that." And, with a hint of uncertainty in her voice, the woman said, "OK ... if you say so."

Finally Jesus saw a man whose face radiated wisdom, like that of Moses when he came down from Mt. Sinai. Jesus said, "I know you have been working hard to restore your health and strength. You have served me well before. I need your help, again. Are you ready?" And the man said, "Every day I wake up and draw breath is a gift of your grace. I belong to you and will follow your will to the best of my ability."

Ok, maybe it didn't happen that way. Or maybe it did, who's to say, really?

The call stories of those we ordain and install as elders today are known completely only to those who have been called. As Presbyterians, we believe deeply that the selection of these elders-elect was the work of the Holy Spirit. Granted, you as a congregation had ideas and input and a committee did its best to come up with a final

list of four. But, deep down, only these individuals know their sense of call, as is the case with anyone who knows what it is to receive a word or a nudge or a shove from our Creator.

Call stories by their very nature vary. How one person may experience a call is almost always going to be different than the next. God tends to speak in ways that each of us in particular can hear and understand.

In turn, how call stories are retold and repeated is going to vary. Take the gospels, one story but four different variations of how Jesus called his first disciples. Matthew, Mark and Luke have it that Jesus called them at the Sea of Galilee, but John makes no mention of the place. John says that Andrew, Simon, Phillip, Nathaniel and an unnamed disciple were called that day. Luke says it was just Simon, James and John, as does Mark, who throws in the nice touch of a miraculous catch of fish as a bonus. Then, as we heard a moment ago, the gospel of Matthew swears it was Simon, Andrew, James and John.

Who was right? Again, who's to say? These variations don't make one gospel right and another wrong. If anything, they remind us that we should read scripture with openness, a double dose of humility and a primary focus on what Jesus is doing above all else. That's the important part, after all, isn't it?

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Call stories pervade scripture from Genesis to Revelation. God and Christ call all types. In the Old Testament, it's Abraham and his lineage, Moses, the judges and the prophets; and, in the New Testament, the apostles and those who would follow in their footsteps such as Paul. Some are called to very specific tasks, others are given a general, lifelong commission and then, at least as far as they think, are often left to their own devices to discern God's will.

The great scholar Joseph Campbell studied call stories from across multiple cultures and traditions around the world, from eastern mysticism to western religions and everything in between. Whatever the circumstance, whoever was being called, Campbell said "that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity to a zone unknown."<sup>1</sup> Another way of saying that, Campbell wrote, is that each of these was a "call to adventure."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, as quoted by Greg Garrett in Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

For those of us who would follow Christ, I suppose the first of those descriptions of calling – the idea of entering a “zone unknown” – is a bit closer to our sense of the Christian life. Karl Barth had the same idea when he wrote of the Christian life as going to “the far country.”

When Christ says “follow me,” as he did that day on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he doesn’t disclose the destination. All we know is that it is a place that is beyond what we can see, over the immediate horizon, a place that requires us to leave whatever is familiar and comfortable.

It may be, literally, a geographic place, a city or a region that has become part of us. One day, I was recounting my call story to a new friend in ministry, someone who knows how God works. When I got to the chapter of how I ended up at this church, only four blocks away from the home where my family has lived for the last 10 years, my friend said, “That just means that God’s next call for you is going to be in Idaho.” I smiled on the outside. But, on the inside, I squirmed because I knew my friend might be right.

Or it may not be that God calls us away from a particular location. Sometimes God calls us to leave a way of living or a way of thinking, a way of seeing other people who might be different or even a way of seeing the world. Sometimes the new perspective is welcomed. Most times, though, it’s not, at least first. It may take some getting used to, some growing into.

And, let’s admit it, when we hear this story about Jesus calling his first disciples, there is another part of it that, deep down, makes us uncomfortable. Jesus says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

Do you notice how the apostles don’t ask for more of an explanation? If it were you or me, we’d probably say, “Slow down there, partner. What do you mean, fish for people? That’s not something I know about. Tell me a little more about what’s involved.”

Instead, scripture says, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”

That’s what unsettles us, isn’t it, the radical nature of the disciples’ response? Not only do they not ask any questions. They walk away from their profession and they even walk away from their families, reminding us all that Jesus’ call is unconditional.

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For now, at least in most respects, that unconditional call has not asked anything quite that radical of, for example, our elders-elect.

Melanie Taosuwan, who is an accountant by profession, will serve as vice chair of the finance committee. Not exactly a “zone unknown” for her, at least for now. Susan Pierson will co-chair our Mission and Justice Committee, tapping into both her passion and profession.

Richard Campbell will chair our Worship Committee, which is a pretty tame group. Yes, it takes worship here at Caldwell very seriously and is open to God’s calling in every way. But it’s also a committee that spends time talking about how long the pieces of communion bread need to be so that we don’t put out fingers in the juice when we dip our bread for intinction. Not much adventure there.

As for Tom Bohr, who will co-chair the Buildings and Grounds Committee, he has already climbed up into our dark, dank old bell tower and I know of at least one 99-year-old crawl space that requires his inspection. Of all of us, he has – or will - experience some zones that are unknown, to most of us anyway. Still, they are all right here, and at the end of the day he can go home and take a shower.

But each of these servant-officers also knows that these kinds of responsibilities are really only the lesser part of their new callings. As we have discussed in the meetings leading up to today, their roles are managerial, yes, but they are also transformational. Their calling is to open themselves up to the possibilities of what God is really up to here in and through the relationships we are building and how we are trying to follow Christ in everything. For them, that means being ready with a listening ear and a caring heart to any member who has something to say or share. *That’s* where the adventure comes in and it is an adventure well worth the calling.

It’s also where all of us come in. The call to serve as an elder of the church doesn’t put these four people on some kind of pedestal. They are not, all of a sudden, wiser or more holy than others. As proven people of God, they are set apart, but only for specific duties. The church as the body of Christ needs everyone of the rest of us, too. The body is not complete without all of us and God calls all of us to find our place and our purpose here and in the world.

And, as I have said, that call is not just to do a duty. We may attend a committee meeting, teach a child’s Sunday school class, have birthday cake with the men of McCreesh Place or tutor a child at Merry Oaks. We may walk with our brothers and sisters in Guatemala, weed the vegetable garden, mentor our youth, take a meal to an

ailing member or visit a shut-in. We may help organize a covered dish luncheon, speak to the Men's or Women's group or cut the pieces of communion bread to just the right length so we don't dunk our fingertips.

In all of these things, we are not just called to serve. We are invited to be transformed, even if it's only little by little, increment by increment, task by task, day by day. That is what it is to follow when Christ says to all of us, "Follow me."

Did you notice the scripture reading in Matthew that followed Jesus' call of his first disciples? There is a general paragraph that describes the spread of Christ's ministry but then scripture turns back to the specific. And with what? You heard it in our second reading today, The Beatitudes – Christ's radical, world-turned-upside-down teachings about how the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit, how those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, how the merciful will receive mercy and how those who are persecuted for Christ's sake will have reward in heaven.

That's not what the world says or what the world does. But it is the first order of business for the disciples and the rest of us - the radical, world-turned-upside-down transformative word of our Lord and the promise of those who follow when Jesus calls.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.