

Sermon on Calls, Matthew 4:12-23, January 22, 2023

As soon as Jesus had finished his 40 days of fasting and praying and figuring things out in the desert, he started calling disciples. He had a few reasons for this. One is that he was always a person who worked in teams with others. Jesus always meant to empower other people to help with his work, not to do it all himself. And he still does. So he calls people to follow him and join him in his work. To become his apprentices, or disciples. That way, whatever the job is, it doesn't ever just depend on one person but on a whole team.

But another reason he called Simon and Andrew and James and John and all the rest was for their benefit. He saw their potential and he called them to follow him so they could grow into their potential. And he continues to do this today, for all of us.

We tend to think of a calling or a vocation as being something the clergy have. And of course, clergy do have a vocation, a specific vocation to specific work in the church. But everyone else also has a vocation. Every single living, breathing person has a vocation, something only they can do. St. Paul explains this in Romans and elsewhere when he uses the example of a body. Every single part of the body is useful and has an important role to play. We might think one part is more important than another, like the head for example. But the head isn't going to go anywhere without a body to carry it around! We might be able to live without a toenail, but if you've ever lost one, you'll know that you really miss it.

Well, it's the same in a church. Every single member of the church has a calling from God. Not the same calling. Some of us are called to be clergy and some people might think clergy are the most important members of the church, but it isn't true. You can have a church without clergy. But you can't have church without people. I'll tell you that during Covid when I was standing up here talking to a camera with an empty church, it felt very weird. Unnatural. Also the camera never laughed at my jokes. Knowing you were there watching made it possible for me. I couldn't do it without someone participating.

Our North American culture tends to value people for what they produce, for what they contribute to the money economy. And they don't tend to value people who don't contribute to the money economy. But God doesn't value us for what we produce. God values us for who we are. God does not see children as potential consumers and employees. God sees children as being valuable in and of themselves, right here and now. God does not value elderly people because they still spend their pension cheques. God values them because of who they are, who they have become over a long life.

And at each stage of life, God has a calling for each person, to help them do two things. One is to contribute to the growth of the Kingdom of God, which I talk about a lot. It means the world the way God would like it to be. Each person is called to work towards that, in their own unique way. And that way will change over the course of our lifetimes. And the second thing a call does is to help us continue to grow and develop and learn and become more fully the person God calls each of us to be. And that will also change over the course of our lifetimes. There's always more to learn and more room for growth.

When you are a child, your main calling is to grow and learn. Specifically, to grow and become a good, decent, capable, caring adult. Of course, kids have shown they can make amazing contributions, while they're growing. I think of Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai. But also kids who bring a bouquet of wildflowers to their elderly neighbour.

In our middle life, hopefully the work we do relates to our calling. But no matter what job we have, we can do it in such a way that we are contributing to the growth of God's kingdom, by how we treat people and how we do our work. We are also probably raising children at this stage, and that is a huge calling in and of itself, a calling to help those kids become the good, decent, capable, caring adults they're called to be.

Even then our calling changes. When my kids were born, I chose to stay at home and look after them. As they grew past the age when they needed constant care, I also did a lot of volunteer work, most of it with kids. I ran the church youth group, ran two different teen camps, ran the Scouting movement, and really enjoyed that work. Most of the time. And I saw it as my calling. Being a Mom was deeply fulfilling for me. Also challenging! Lots of opportunities for personal growth there!

But then my kids grew up and left home, and I felt totally lost. I'd lost my job! Who was I? I still did the volunteer work, until we moved. Charles was going around saying, "It's so great having the house to ourselves. We're falling in love all over again." And I'd look at him like he had three heads and say, "Speak for yourself. The place feels like a tomb and I feel depressed and lost." I got over it, after a while. And when we moved to Halifax, that's when I felt a call to ordained ministry, which has been great, too, also deeply fulfilling. And almost as challenging as raising kids. Lots more opportunities for personal growth.

And in early retirement, people often are very active doing volunteer work or making friendships and caring for people. Those are usually our most active church volunteers. But at some point in our lives, we no longer have the energy or the health and strength to do all those things we used to do. We can no longer climb up on the roof and fix the shingles or run the whole Sunday school or whatever it was. At some point it becomes a bit too much for us and we have to give these things up, even though we still would love to be doing them. And a lot of people start feeling useless at that point in their lives, and then they start feeling depressed, because people need to feel their life is meaningful.

But that's when we have to really resist our society's idea that value = productivity. That is **not** what God thinks. And God still has a call for each of us, even then. There are still things we can do or be to find meaning in life. Just different things. Do you have any idea how much you've learned and experienced over the last 70 or 80 or 90 years? Money can't buy that kind of wisdom. We can share our wisdom. And our stories.

We can pray. Possibly for the first time in our lives, we actually have a lot of leisure to pray. I know that's one of the things Charles is enjoying about retirement. He finally has time to really pray. And we can still love people, whether that's our family or our friends or people who live in the nursing home with us. We can still be loving, caring, decent people. Just listening to someone is a huge gift to give them. Still so much we can do.

But it's this second thing I mostly want to talk about today. That is God's calling to us to continually grow and develop and become fully the person God is calling us to be. St. Paul puts it this way, "to grow into the full stature of Christ." Evangelicals talk about converting people to Christ. That is, bringing them to the point where they say yes to following Jesus. And that is certainly an important turning point in our lives, when we decide that yes, we do want to follow Jesus. That's what the 4 disciples we read about today did. They said yes to following Jesus, left their nets and set off with him.

But that wasn't the end of the story. They then entered three years of intensive training with Jesus personally, and then they had to learn by doing when they were leading the early church. And if you read the book of Acts, you'll quickly realise they weren't done at that stage, they were not perfect. They still had a lot of growing to do.

The Brothers of St. John the Evangelist, Anglican monks, talk about the ongoing conversion of life. This starts before we decide to say yes to Jesus, and it continues afterwards. They say that the life they lead, as monks in an Anglican monastery, is partly about their own continuing conversion, their own growth and development into the people God wants them to be. And this lasts their whole life.

One way God does that is to call new people to be monks who might be difficult to get along with. This gives the monks who are already there lots of chances to overcome their own resistance to loving each other unconditionally. To deal with their own baggage that makes them feel annoyed. It's good to think of annoying people as gifts to help us grow into our full potential as loving people. This is true for all of us, too, in our families, neighbourhoods and the church. God gives us lots of people to practice being loving on.

At each stage of life, God is going to keep on offering us new opportunities to grow, which will challenge us, and help others and also, in the end, bring us joy. So here's an example. You might not like this. It's hard to do. One thing I've noticed about older people is that they HATE to become dependent. They are used to doing things for themselves and they are used to helping other people and they don't want to be the ones being helped. A very natural feeling. My own Mom would be a great example of this.

And yet, there's a grace in being willing to receive. One way to show love is to give and to help others. But another way to show love is to receive gifts and to allow others to help us. This is harder, and requires a growth in humility, the grace of letting go of control, but in the end it does bring joy. If you think this is hogwash, consider how you feel if you offer a gift or help to someone and it's rejected. It's kind of devastating. But when the person we're offering that to accepts it graciously and kindly, well, that brings us joy. We can bring people joy by accepting their help and their gifts, too. That's just one example.

Be sure that God will call us to something that we need to do in order to grow. And also something that will challenge us but bring us joy, and something that will be of use to the world. We sometimes resist these calls, but they don't leave us alone. Following God's calling, at each stage of our lives, is the only real path to fulfillment and contentment. I've never heard that Peter and the others regretted saying yes to Jesus. Neither will we.