

## Sermon on Calling, February 6, 2022

When I was on Town Council in Lockeport, we got a whole whack of government grants for student summer employment, and one of my jobs as a Councillor was to help hire students for these jobs. The Crescent Beach Centre was a lovely building, right on the Lockeport beach, one of the nicest beaches on the South Shore, and it housed our tourist bureau, a gift shop, info about the town and beach, and an ice cream stand. And there were change rooms and washrooms. We were hiring about 6 students. We had 20 applicants.

So we did what you do. The committee sat down and listed things we were looking for: skills, qualifications, experience. Good with the public. Maybe a second language. Experience with cash. Willing to clean washrooms, etc. Then we went through the resumes and gave points and we short listed about 10 people and then we interviewed them and chose six. This was a bit tricky. For one thing, we all knew all these kids, who were in school with our kids, and we all knew their parents, too. There was a certain amount of pressure. One of the bank tellers cold shouldered me for a while because we didn't pick her daughter. Of course, if they didn't get this job, they could apply at the Rec Centre or Museum, or somewhere else. Most of them ended up with something.

Our two top candidates were dating each other, so we had a debate about whether that was a good thing or not. And I remember saying, "Dating is bad enough, but what if they break up?" In the end we hired them and guess what? I got a call one day saying, "Remember what you said?" "No," I replied. "You said, 'What if they break up?' Well, they did." And I was right, it was a problem. But on the whole we did pretty well in filling the jobs with good people using that method.

This week's stories in the Bible are mostly about calls. Calls from God to do a particular job. Last week we read about Jeremiah. God said he had chosen him from the womb to be a prophet. Isaiah has a vision of God and he volunteers to be a prophet. "Here I am. Send me." Which is most unusual. We get the call of Peter and his brother Andrew and James and John. And Paul mentions his call as an apostle. And I've got to say, God does not seem to follow this accepted procedure for filling jobs. Calling the person with the best qualifications.

I mean, would you choose a kid to be a prophet? To go tell the king what he was doing wrong? Would you call a brash fisherman to be the head of the church? Or even a church leader? Would you call the church's Public Enemy #1 to be an evangelist to the Gentiles? I wouldn't. Not one of these people had any of the qualifications you might expect, except possibly Isaiah. I don't know how God makes his choices, but they seem to work out pretty well for all he doesn't subscribe to human wisdom.

I was looking at all 4 of these call stories and one thing is interesting. The first response of the people is to think they can't do it or they're not worthy. Jeremiah says he's just a boy and not good at public speaking. Isaiah says, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." He thinks he's going to die.

Paul notes that he was totally unworthy to be an apostle because he persecuted the church. Peter falls to his knees before Jesus (and remember the boat was full to the gunwhales with flopping, dying fish, so he's probably up to his armpits in fish), and says, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man."

And you know what? God is not fazed by any of this. I read a meme on Facebook this week that said, "When God put a calling on your life, he already factored in your [failings]." Or something like that. And each of these stories shows us that God is totally aware of our shortcomings and is able to deal with them. God touches Jeremiah's mouth and says, "You can't speak? Look, now I've put my words in your mouth and you shall speak for me."

He sends a seraph to Isaiah, with a burning coal from the altar, and touches his lips and the seraph tells him his guilt has departed and his sin is blotted out. You know, that's gotta hurt. And sometimes the process of coming to terms with our past and letting it go is a painful process - I bet it was for Paul - but one God is very willing to help us with. St. Paul is knocked off his camel and blinded in the revelation Jesus gives him, and he spends three days in the dark thinking and praying and realising he was dead wrong about pretty much everything and on the wrong side. But then he is forgiven and healed and baptised. And called. And he is ready to say yes and move on. And Jesus just tells St. Peter not to be afraid: he has a job for him.

You know, none of those people were wrong when they thought they weren't worthy. Where they were wrong was in thinking that mattered. If God waited around for perfect people to do his work, he'd be waiting a long time. Where they were also wrong was in thinking they had to do the work in their own strength somehow. But it is God who works through us.

Jesus gives St. Peter an object lesson in this. All night long he and his partners were fishing and caught absolutely nothing. Not a sardine. But Jesus tells him to put out into the deep (that's significant, we follow Jesus off the deep end), and let down his nets. And even though he doesn't see what good it could do, Peter obeys him, and ends up catching so many fish the two boats are almost sinking. Peter is not being asked to catch people in his own strength and with his own qualifications. He is being asked to let God work through him. Same as his brother Andrew and his partners James and John. Same as Jeremiah, to whom God gives the words, and Isaiah and St. Paul, too. And it's God who miraculously makes that work, just like the fish.

When Jesus called his disciples and then later chose the 12 to be apostles, he didn't just give them inspiration and turn them loose. He then spent 3 years of intensive training with them. He didn't expect them to magically know what to do, but he taught them.

This is still how the church operates. In choosing clergy, the first thing is a call, but this is tested and you enter training and the call is further tested along the way, and after 3 years of so - maybe less if you already have theological training as St. Paul did - if the church still thinks you're called and you are still willing to say yes, then you're ordained.

But calls are not just for clergy. Of course, everyone is not called to ordained ministry, which is a good thing. It would be a pretty weird church if we were. But everyone is called to serve God in one way or another. Everyone. I think this is partly because there are things that need to be done that only we can do, in the church and in the world. Maybe because of our unique skills or personality. Maybe because of our unique place in the world. And I also believe it's because that's how God operates. God welcomes us into his work, as partners. Same way a good parent works alongside their kids and teaches them how to do things. So that we can learn and grow and have a sense of fulfillment and pleasure in a job well done.

Figuring out a calling isn't always easy. We call it "discernment" which basically means figuring out. Listening, praying, thinking, reflecting, being open. Sometimes we are called to difficult things, like Jeremiah called to go tell the king he was messing up. Sometimes we are called to less difficult things, like raising our children. Though actually that can be pretty tough, too. I find we are usually called to things that will challenge us and help us grow. We are called to things that will help the world. As I've said before, the great American Presbyterian pastor, Frederick Buechner, says your calling is where your deep joy meets the world's deep needs.

What this means is that your calling will be doing something good in the world. Not necessarily something huge like bringing world peace or inventing insulin or something. But something that is good and helpful, like being a nurse or volunteering at a food bank or looking after your aging parents. And it will bring you joy to do it. Not necessarily every minute. But a deep sense of satisfaction and rightness.

And you will grow into your role, getting better at it as you go. And as you get better at it, God will probably give you a few more challenges, to keep you growing and learning and fresh. Maybe give you a new calling. But like Peter and the fish, it is really God who is working through us in our callings and perhaps the most important thing we need to learn is how to be open to following his lead. And you know, there were moments when all these people found their callings difficult, but I never heard that they seriously regretted saying yes.

You might want to spend some time thinking and praying about what God is calling you to do right now. It might be what you're already doing. It often is, if we're faithful Christians who've been trying to follow Jesus all our lives. Or it might be something new that is pulling at you, that you can't get out of your mind.

The thing about callings is that they are not a sort of inconvenience that we are pushed into, like the chores our Mom and Dad wanted us to do as kids. They are more like a door opening into a wider world, like an opportunity to spread our wings and fly. They are God's way of keeping our lives full and joyful and satisfying and keeping us growing into our full potential. St. Peter probably wouldn't have fulfilled his potential if he'd just kept fishing all his life. Our calling is something we can seek out eagerly, knowing that when we are doing those things, we will feel that this is what we were made for, this is who we really are. I know I feel that way about priesthood. What is God calling you to do or be?

