

Three Stories About Call

Interestingly enough, our stories today all seem to be connected, as they all reflect a sense of call: the call of Moses; who the early church was called to be; and Jesus' call to the disciples to take up their cross and follow him. Many people believe that call is only for people who go on to be ordained, to make ministry their life's work; I believe, and our theology teaches, that ministry is the life's work of all of us who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, and therefore all of us are called to something. Called to use our gifts in some way within the body of Christ. Called to be people of God without fear, believing and trusting in God to be with us.

Call of Moses—

One day on his way to shepherd his sheep, Moses passes by a bush and notices that it's on fire. Blazing fire. The funny thing is, it isn't burning up the way you'd expect a bush to do. So Moses stopped—who wouldn't? thinking "what's going on here?" And when God saw that Moses had noticed and stopped, God spoke to Moses.

God: I see my people suffering; I am sending you to lead them out of captivity.

Moses: Who me Lord? Who am I to lead them?

Sometimes we aren't sure of our ability to lead. We believe ourselves to be inadequate, we believe it isn't our place to lead, we have our own lives with our own problems. Our own questions to God echo those of Moses:

Who am I to tell others what they should believe? Who am I to teach a Sunday School class or lead a Bible Study? Who am I to be on session or take part in a committee? How can I find the time to lead at church when I have my job, family, friends, community activities, etc. to worry about? I'm too old/ young/ busy/ tired/ inadequate—who am I to lead?

Add to these questions the fact that we don't usually receive our call to lead from a burning bush. It isn't usually that obvious, is it? For me it's more like a still, small voice whispering, or a stirring in my soul that makes me feel restless and open to something new. But then the "what" I'm being called to isn't often clear, at first. So how do we know what we're being called to do?

Paul tells us:

Call to the early church (Paul)

It seems as if the early church struggled with the same questions. How do we be church, how do we know whom God has called to lead, how do we know what God is calling us to be and do? Paul's answer: *Don't be conformed to the world—don't copy what the world does, don't let the culture or the society lead you around by the nose—but be so changed by God in the way you think and act that it becomes second nature to know God's desire—what is good, acceptable, perfect in God's eyes.*

We each have gifts, and all gifts are equally useful to the body of Christ, and in fact we function better when we all work together than when we don't. And what are the hallmarks of a functional body?

Genuine love

Hate of evil

Holding on to the good

Passion for God and for serving God

Joyful hope

Patience in suffering

Perseverance in prayer

Giving to the body for the good of any or all

Hospitality

Blessing of enemies

Support of those in the body—both in joy and in sorrow

Harmony between members

No division based on economic status

No seeking revenge

Peace within the body and with those outside the body

Think about our society today—how divisive and argumentative everything is. Outside the church we argue about politics, economics, taxes, religion, sometimes it seems like we argue about everything under the sun. Inside the church we're no better, really—we argue about where to put the furniture, what color carpet we need, what kind of music is best in worship, who can and cannot be ordained to ministry, which denomination (or non-denomination) follows God most "correctly." How does all this arguing help us be the church that God intends us to be, how does all this arguing help us be the church that Christ died on the cross for?

Take up your cross (and other hard sayings.)

It's easy to be church when Jesus is feeding the 5000. We can emulate that by Cooking for Cornerstone, or by collecting for Be Concerned or by taking a meal to a shut ins. It's easy to be church when there's a death or an illness—we can pray, we can be present, we can even work

toward healing. It's even easy to be church when Jesus is healing a blind person or driving out demons—we can emulate that by seeking the good, working to bring about healing in our own families, our church families, and our communities—both physical and emotional healing.

Volunteering for the Justice Center, for Habitat, for Volunteer Ministries Center--- those are easy to do because they're good causes, they make us feel like we're doing something positive (and we are, no doubt.)

It's harder, though, to be church, to be people of faith, when we hear other things Jesus says, like "sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me" or "go and take nothing with you" or "take up your cross and follow me." Sayings that sound difficult and dark and are hard to understand. Sayings that are so opposite of what the world tells us. The question everyone always has about the rich young ruler passage, for example, is "does God really intend for us to sell all we have?" It's so outside of our way of doing things, in a society where having things is the way we define ourselves. Or "go and take nothing." But how will I eat Lord, and where will I sleep? It isn't smart to take off on a journey without some kind of plan—that's dangerous. God doesn't want us to put ourselves at risk, does God? And what's this "take up your cross?" That doesn't sound good!

It's so hard for us to imagine that, yes, Jesus does want us to "sell what we have", take risks, sacrifice ourselves—or at least our own self-interest. And really, these teachings all work together in a way—having stuff weighs us down, makes it hard or even impossible for us to take risks, keeps us from setting aside our own self-interest in order to follow the way of Christ. We have so much invested in the way we live our lives, in the way we run our churches—money, time, emotions—that when Jesus looks us in the eye and gives us these hard teachings we turn away. Or we kid ourselves into thinking that we can have our stuff and follow Jesus too.

But what if we did embrace the intent of Jesus' more difficult teachings? What if we did take up our own crosses, whatever they might be? What if we emptied ourselves and our lives of whatever it is that encumbers us? What if we took only the clothes on our back and the shoes on our feet, and went into the ministry field to find the lost sheep?

Everything we do here should be a part of following Jesus. Whether we take the great commission as our guide (go, teach, preach, baptize) and have making disciples as our purpose, or whether we adopt Jesus' call to feed and tend his sheep, or whether we do a combination of the two—which is my

preference for ministry, by the way—everything we do should be a part of living out the ministry that Jesus introduced to the world through the way that he lived and taught.

Fear is a prevalent emotion in our world today—with some good reason. But we're encouraged to be afraid by our leaders, and we're held hostage in many ways by fear—fear of failure, fear of losing our place in the world, fear that if someone else has something then I won't have anything, fear that someone is going to cheat us, fear that someone is going to hurt or kill us, fear that we will run out of money before we run out of life. Fear that we'll lose our job or our house or even just fear that something will change, that we will have to get used to a new way of doing things or thinking about things, that we'll be made uncomfortable. That we will have to let go of something that is meaningful to us, that we will have to sacrifice.

But what do we hear over and over in the Bible? From God, from angels, from Jesus Christ himself?

Don't be afraid.

When we're unsure of what God is calling us to do or whether we'll make good leaders; when we're unsure about our place in the body of Christ, both as individuals and as a congregation; when we're asked to do more than we think we're capable of, when we're asked to set aside ourselves and those things we hold dear in order to follow Christ on the Way, when we face whatever scary change that we didn't ask for and don't want to deal with, when all this happens and more we know we can face it all without fear because God is with us, God still speaks to us, God still gives us the strength to stare down all of the problems of our lives, our communities, and our world. God in Christ is our example to follow, our bread life, our little piece of God who is with us always.

This is an uncertain time for churches in general, but it is a good time too, because we have the opportunity to be intentional about who we are and where we're going in ministry together. We have the opportunity to work on discerning God's purpose for COF, truly an ongoing process, and we don't need to be afraid of any changes that will come because we know God is with us. We have a chance to discern what is working for us and what isn't, what ministries are making disciples and need to be kept and which aren't. Someone recently made the observation to me that we Presbyterians are good at starting things when they need to be started but bad at ending things when they need to be ended. The funny thing about change is, it happens whether we want it or not. Maybe that's why it is so scary sometimes. In that light, perhaps change is our cross. It is certainly true that churches of

our ilk are going to have to change from “ministry as usual” in order to continue to be a force in the world. Not that we should copy the non-denominational church down the street; but we need to figure out our place and our purpose in the community and the world. And then live into it.

May the God of Moses and Paul and Jesus lead us on the Way, and may we remember in our most fearful times to not be afraid, for God in Christ is with us. Amen.