

**SERMON: “Consider Your Call...”**

**August 23, 2009**

PRAYER: Gracious God, in ways as varied as our distinctive personalities, you call us to be your people. Grant now that through the reading and preaching of your Word may we hear your call to use the gifts you give us in the work to which you call us, so that by the power of your Spirit, we may fulfill the promises of our baptism; through him who calls and claims us as his own, Christ our Lord. Amen.

OT LESSON: Isaiah 43:1-7

NT LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Over the next year you will be hearing a great deal in our church about **Christian Vocation**—how we respond to the call of God in the lives we live and the work we do. This morning we launch a remarkable program developed by Buz and others entitled ***CALLED FOURTH***. Throughout the year in the youth program, in worship, and on Wednesday nights we will be looking at seven biblical callings—Stewardship of Creation, Welcoming the Stranger, Healing and Wholeness, Proclaiming the Gospel, Justice and Reconciliation, Guiding Future Generations, and Praising the Lord. Buz and a special task force submitted a proposal to the Fund for Theological Education for funding the initiative as part of their *Cultures of Call* Program. This past spring we were notified that we had received a grant from the Lilly Endowment of \$11,000 to implement the program. We were the only Presbyterian church in the country to receive one of the grants this cycle. Not bad!

For Presbyterians, talking about the “call of God” is part of our denominational DNA. We say that a minister is “called by God” to serve as pastor of a church. We say that Elders and Deacons are “called by God” through the voice and vote of the congregation. If we have learned to speak the language of faith, we may refer to the work we do as our Vocation--our Calling.

Over the next several weeks we will be looking together in worship at stories of the call of God in scripture. We will ask: Who does God call? How does God call? For what purpose does God call, even folks like us? In addition we will offer a 13-week adult church school class on the call of God, and from time to time we will offer sermons on the seven biblical callings around which the *Called Fourth* program is built.

Let's begin this morning at a relatively simple level by considering the call of God in general. Note first of all that stories of the call of God run throughout the Bible. If you were to take scissors and cut out of the Bible every reference to God's calling particular people to particular tasks, there wouldn't be much left. From beginning to end the Bible is the narrative of those whom God has called and claimed and empowered to do God's work in the world. The God of the Bible is a **calling God**.

One of the things it means to say that God is a “**calling God**,” is that in all of God's dealings with us, **God takes the initiative**. God does not wait for us to volunteer or enlist in his service. God makes the first move. God “drafts” us into service. The God who calls us into being to begin with, calls us into a deeply personal relationship. In those lovely words from the prophet Isaiah, that we use so often, the Lord declares, “**Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine.**”

First and foremost the call of God is a **personal expression of the grace of God**. God does not send out invitations marked “To whom it may concern.” God calls us by name, in all the distinctiveness of our individual personalities. “I have called you by name; you are mine.” **YOU** are mine--with all the quirks that make you who you are. “I have called YOU by name.” The first thing we need to say is that you and I are called by the grace of God *in person*.

But the gracious call of God that is always intensely personal is at the same time **inescapably social**. It inevitably involves us with others and with the world around us. In calling us to himself in Jesus Christ, God joins us in fellowship with one another. Christian discipleship is always a “team sport.” We are never Christians alone. We are called to be members one of another in the body of Christ on earth.

We affirm the call of God into the covenant fellowship of the Church every time we celebrate a baptism. Before you or I are called to do anything as God's people, we are first called to receive a name and an identity—**“child of the covenant...marked with the sign of the cross...to be Christ's own forever.”** In baptism we are united to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, in whom all the blessings of God are given to us. GIVEN to us--not possessed by us. The blessings of God are not ours by right. They are not something we have earned or deserved by ourselves. It is only as we are joined to Jesus Christ in the fellowship of his church that we receive the life God has for us.

The Apostle Paul urges that motley crew of unsaintly saints in the church in Corinth to **“consider their call,”** but first he invites them to take a long, hard look at themselves.

**“Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth...”** But God chose you anyway!

**“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world...so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”**

The call of God is not dependent on *our* qualifications. In fact throughout scripture it seems that God has a peculiar fondness for calling ones that would seem to us to be the least likely candidates to accomplish his purposes. The call of God is rooted, not in how wonderful *we* are, but in how merciful and gracious *God* is.

So rather than being a source of pride, the gracious call of God properly leads to a sense of gratitude and humility. Think how utterly amazing it is that the Lord God almighty should call, and can use, even folks like us...and sometimes, as we will see in the weeks ahead, ones who are considerably worse than we might ever be!

Paul goes on to insist that no matter who we may be, in and of ourselves, God is the source of our life in Christ Jesus **“whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and redemption.”** Eugene Peterson puts it much more simply in *The Message*, when he says, **“Everything that we have--right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start--comes from God by way of Jesus Christ.”**

What it all comes down to is that by the gracious call of God in Jesus Christ we receive a life that is not our own. The image the Bible often uses to depict that new life is that of putting on a new suit of clothes. Think of it this way. It's Saturday afternoon. You come in grubby from working in the yard. You take a bath--put on clean clothes to get ready to go to a wedding. You come in grungy—you leave looking like a new man, a new woman. By faith we are invited to “put on” the righteousness of Christ like a new suit of clothes or a new dress. In that new garb the Father treats us *as if* we were righteous ourselves.

The call of God is always an expression of God's grace. God calls us, not because *we* are good, but because *God* is good--not because we are righteous, but because God is faithful. We cannot say that often enough. The call of God is not rooted in who *we* are, but in who *God* is. God's call is always an expression of the uncalled-for goodness and mercy of God. Elsewhere Paul exclaims,

**“By grace you have been (called and) saved through faith; this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God--not because of works [not because of your own achievements] lest anyone should boast.”** (Eph. 2:8, 9)

Here we need to pause to acknowledge that there is a danger lurking just beneath the surface of our emphasis on the call of God, and that is the age-old problem of **pride**--what Paul calls **“boasting.”** One of the most persistent temptations of those who are convinced that they have been called by God is religious

arrogance. People who are convinced that they have been called by God for a vital mission can be guilty of terrible abuses of others.

Someone in 17th century England supposedly said that he would “rather face a whole regiment with drawn swords than one lone Calvinist convinced he was doing the will of God.” People who are absolutely certain that God has ordained them to do his bidding can easily get carried away by their religious zeal and be very dangerous!

Our call by God is not meant to be a source of pride, but the source of a new sense of significance. By the grace of God our lives matter! You see, there is a world of difference between the pride that says, “Look how good I am that God should call *me*..” and the sense of worth that comes from knowing that if God has called even me--with all my faults and failings, with all my inadequacies--then there must be something in this conflicted life of mine that God can and will use for good.” There is! By the grace of God there is!

There is a powerful scene near the end of Jean Anouilh's play *Becket*, in which the King, Henry II, has appointed Thomas Becket to be the Archbishop of Canterbury--the head of the Church of England. Henry is sure that his old friend Becket, with whom he had shared many wild times as they were growing up together, will go along with his scheme to bring the church under his control. What the King had not counted on was the effect that Becket's ordination as Archbishop would have on him.

Becket saw his ordination, not merely as a political ploy to gain control of the church, but as a call from God, a summons to serve “the honor of God.” And so he refused to go along with the King's plan. The King is astonished. He reminds Becket of their wild days and nights together as young men. What has happened to him? Why is he not acting like himself? “Perhaps,” Becket replies, “I am no longer like myself.” The King demands to know why. Becket tells him of his sense of call, his feeling that an ultimate claim had been placed on his life, however worthless it may have been up to that point. It was at my ordination as Archbishop, he says, that “I felt for the first time that I was being entrusted with something, that's all--there in that empty cathedral...that day when you ordered me to take up this burden. I was a man without honor. And suddenly I found it...the honor of God.”<sup>1</sup>

**"I felt for the first time that I was being entrusted with something,"** says Becket, something good, something right, something important. That's what the call of God can do. It can give you a new sense of significance, as one entrusted by God with something important to do with your life. A mission—a purpose—a goal. Something more important than any career you may pursue, or any fortune you may earn. Something more important than any book you may write, or case you may win, or award you may receive. Something that reflects the honor of God!

The call of God can be a source of deadly pride and religious arrogance. But more often it can be a powerful, deeply moving experience in which, perhaps for the first time, you find a sense of meaning and value to your life that you had not known before.

That's what Christ wants for you--to find your place in the “honor of God.” He wants you to know that your life has worth, not because of who you are and what you have achieved, but because of who God is and how God has called even you to share in the accomplishment of God's purposes in the world. That sense of call, instead of filling you with pride, can drive you to your knees in wonder and gratitude, knowing that the Creator of the heavens and the earth intends to make of your life something good and fine and useful in God's work of redeeming love among us.

But remember that when we speak of the “call of God,” we are not just talking about going to seminary and being ordained to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. We are saying that God calls **each** of

us to use *whatever* gifts and skills and talents are ours in the service of others. For *some* that may mean leaving everything to go to seminary--as several in this church have. But for more of you it will mean staying where you are and finding ways to use your gifts in the work that needs to be done to build up the life of this community...whether that means tutoring kids at Sterling, or teaching adults to read, or running for City or County Council, or helping raise money for the United Way or A Child's Haven, or simply being the best employer or surgeon or attorney or teacher or student or parent or spouse you can be.

The ways in which you may be called to serve the honor of God are as varied as the needs of the whole human family. But one thing stands out. God's call most often comes at the intersection between your particular gifts and the needs of others. In the words of Frederick Buechner, that I am sure you will hear often this year, **“The place where God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”**<sup>ii</sup> At the place where the gifts God has entrusted to you intersect with the needs of the world God loves, there the call of God lays claim on your life.

By the grace of God each of us, and all of us, are called by God to be disciples of Jesus Christ, as together in the fellowship of his church we share in God's work of redeeming love in the world. **“Consider your call, brothers and sisters in Christ,”** consider your call...and respond as God gives you grace and strength to do. To the honor of God. Amen.

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NOTES:

- i. Told in Tom Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., 1987) pp. 81-82.
- ii. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973) p. 95.