

There were always a few kids in school who knew from first grade on just what they wanted to be after they grew up. Do you remember? Remember that kid who wanted to be a doctor? He enjoyed playing with chemistry sets, dissected earthworms, hung out at the science museum, got summer jobs at labs and hospitals, and eventually happily trotted off to medical school. I know that when my dad was around 7 years of age he would invite the kids from his neighborhood over and would hold a little worship service at his house. He even took an offering during the service and would later put the money he collected in his offering envelope for church.

Many of us, however, spend quite a bit of time shopping around before we finally find, or fall into, a profession that seems to suit our personality. The most popular childhood careers of firefighter, football player, ballerina, and astronaut are not reflected in the numbers of adults actually involved in those pursuits. Instead we "settle" for jobs that need to be done, or are the most available. When's the last time you heard a kid dreaming about growing up to be an office manager, or a banker, or an electrical line repairer. But all those jobs must be done and done well by someone, if we are to keep our businesses, our banks, our communities, and our homes running smoothly.

One career choice that, for good or ill, has always put a lot of emphasis on hearing an early and persistent "calling" is the ministry — specifically those who seek formal ordination and see their identity as a recognized member of that profession. This is something that I mentioned my father experienced when he was just a young man in elementary school. There are some who always knew they were "called" to ministry —kids like my dad who conducted all the pet funerals, organized fake weddings, and held slightly spooky prayer vigils throughout their childhood.

Then there are those who experience a much more dramatic "calling" as the result of a transforming Damascus-Road moment in their lives. These are the men and women who may have been well-settled in either perfectly "normal," or sometimes more impressively imperfectly wicked lives. These are the men and women who may have said at one point in time, "There's one thing I'll never consider becoming - a minister." Then, suddenly, they are brought up short by the command of Christ in their lives. For these individuals a "calling" is more an identifiable moment than an unfolding work-in-progress.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, our second lesson for today, Paul affirms the miracle of living life under the power of a distinctive and discernable "call," while at the same time he makes this "call" the common experience and guiding imperative of every believer. Paul urges the Corinthians, after taking a long, hard look at the wisdom of the world, to "consider [their] call." He refuses to allow this community to get away with pigeonholing a "call" into a tidy, tiny itty little box.

Paul's "call" to be an apostle was not one that involved him spending his life crafting eloquent theological discourses on the truths of Christ. He did not receive his "call" so that he could spend his active ministry re-enacting and extending the work of people like John the Baptist. Paul boasts that he had done only a minimal amount of baptizing, some of which seems to have almost entirely escaped his memory. Even more dramatic is Paul's insistence that, instead of speaking with great wisdom, he is proud to offer a message most of the world will deem "foolishness."

It's your call, Paul says. You have a choice here! Follow the wisdom of the world, or the foolishness of the cross. To bring this into focus, in verse 26 in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul gently urges his readers "consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth," he declares. He doesn't say that they

were all apparently foolish, weak, or scandalous. But, "he does say not many, in other words some were." But they were chosen by God nonetheless...but chosen, not to cluster around a pastoral personality, or philosophical guru, but to proclaim the "message about the cross."

I think it is important for us to know that Paul refused to see his own "calling" as way of somehow cloning Christians under his personal sway and style. Paul's call was to proclaim Christ. Paul's call was to build up the body of Christ. Paul's call was to bring all the baptized and reborn into a unity "in Christ."

In essence you might say that Paul whittles down the meaning of the word "call" to its most elementary, but most basic bare bones. Anyone, including the Corinthians, can experience and enact Paul's understanding of having a "call." The work associated with what Paul is talking about is not found in eloquent theologizing, or performing mystical rites for which one must specially be ordained. Paul insists that his only "call," and the true essence of any calling, is simply to "proclaim the gospel!"

This call, Paul maintains, is reserved for those whose life is "in Christ Jesus." The special call to ministry the first-century Corinthians received, not to speak of millions of other men and women over the past two thousand years or so, is the call to be gathered together "in Christ." And if in Christ, we are empowered by the one "who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."

Take a moment to think about your own call. You are chosen, though you might not know it or believe it. David, the youngest of many brothers, was tending sheep when summoned by Samuel. Abraham was minding his own business in Ur. Jeremiah was a shy and unwilling youth. God often calls us when we are running errands, doing the mundane, thankless chores of life. When we least expect it, we are elected.

Moses, was hiding out on the back side of the Midian desert, was running an errand when a bush started burning that would not be consumed until he faced Pharaoh. Isaiah was somewhere in the temple, performing his regular priestly duties, when the heavens came down and the Holy commissioned him to go a bring God's judgement to His people. Ezekiel, performing his pastoral tasks in the Exile, was transported by a divine limousine service to a valley filled with dry bones. Amos was out herding sheep and keeping sycamore trees when the voice came and compelled him to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Andrew and Peter were fishing out on the Sea of Galilee when the Master called them from their nets into a life of discipleship in which they would fish for people.

In Paul's definition of his own call to a life of serving Christ, the work of the ordained clergy is not the dramatic, soul stimulating, lifesaving, work of firefighting, space-walking, ballet dancing or touchdown scoring. In reality, most ministers are the office managers, the bank tellers, the electrical repairers: those who perform labors crucial to keeping things running smoothly. The glamorous, front-line work of a "call," the show-stopping, high-profile, hot-stuff calling of ministry is simply "to proclaim the gospel," to live the truth of the "foolishness" of the cross which is in reality the "power of God."

Fleming Rutledge, one of the first women ordained in the Episcopal Church; in a sermon delivered at the historic Trinity Church in the City of Boston, tells of an incident in her life that happened as she was crossing the street near her parish in New York City. "A taxi came roaring around the corner and knocked me to the pavement. A crowd gathered and the ambulance was called, but it took an unusually long time for it to arrive. It was 40 minutes before I was actually put on the gurney. In the meantime, I lay on the asphalt. I was aware of a lot of people standing around looking down at me. What I remember most about that long wait was the great distance between me on the concrete and the faces high above. In

those minutes I very much needed someone to get down on the ground with me, to put a coat under my head, to hold my hand and stay down with me until help arrived Love comes down she proclaimed in her sermon."

Calls" are not spent high and lifted up. True "calls" are spent low and bent down. An old "Pontius Puddle" cartoon begins with "I wonder if God can really hear me." The next frame shows Pontius praying, "Hey God! What should I do with my life?" The third frame has a voice from heaven saying, "Feed the hungry, right injustice, work for peace." "Just testing!" Pontius replies. "Same here," God speaks back.

Your call! It's your calling." During the season of Lent, perhaps we need to learn to open our hearts, our souls, and our minds and truly listen to what God is asking of us. In fact, that is a common theme found in the Gospels. Jesus tells his followers that they are to listen! "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." "Let those with ears listen." "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it." During the transfiguration the three disciples who are with Jesus hear God declare, "This is my son, my beloved, listen to him!" Similarly, our Creator says something similar to us as he calls us to live out our faith through our words and actions. And today Paul reminds us that as we do this we are called to share the message of the Cross with any and all people we encounter in this world. Amen.