

Luke 10:25-37

Beyond the Call

Sunday September 29, 2013

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The Congregational Church of Needham

Our theme this month is Vocation: Hearing God's Call. We have talked about hearing God's call all month and our series has coincided with two huge celebrations of young adults affiliated with our church who have heard that call to commit themselves to serving God in the church. Two weeks ago Rev. Jamie Green was installed as our Associate Minister for children and Youth, and her service of installation was a celebration of that call. Today we will be hosting the ordination of John Allen who grew up in this church and heard God's call in these pews, and on church-sponsored mission trips. Today he is a Lilly Fellow at the Wellesley Village Church, and preparing for ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ.

The examples of God's call to various people in the Bible are so plentiful that vocation is one of the most prominent Biblical themes. Throughout scripture God reached out to people. God called them to consider new paths for their lives. God lifted their horizon so that they dreamt new dreams and envision whole new career paths. God fulfilled Abraham's hopes. God recognized Moses' potential. God challenged Esther to speak up. God summoned Isaiah to be a prophet, Mary to have a child, Deborah to be a judge and Peter to be a fisher of men.

God reached out to fishermen, homemakers, businessmen, and lawyers. Scripture is full of people from every walk of life who discern a new sense of purpose and then prepare to step up and take their own unique gifts of intellect, curiosity or leadership, and use them for a holy purpose.

Inevitably, throughout this month we have each been thinking about what it means to hear God's call in our own lives. What, if anything, does God want us to do? That is the very question that the disciples are talking to Jesus about in the tenth chapter of Luke's gospel when he tells them the story of the Good Samaritan. After they have followed him for a while, they ask - "What do we need to do to really live with faith?" How do we put our faith into action? When we respond to the call of God in our lives – how far do we need to go? "

Jesus tells the story of a stranger, a man from across the Israeli border. He is a Samaritan, from a country with a history of nasty disputes with Israel. Samaritans are folks who would have been on guard when they came to Israel, and for good reason. But Jesus tells a story in which this alien exemplified compassion. This stranger was kind to a Jewish man who has been assaulted. The man was robbed, and left for dead. His own religious leader, a Priest and Levite saw him, but could not deal with his injuries. Then, this Samaritan, a hated stranger, bent down, dressed his wounds, lifted him up and transported him to the nearest inn, where he paid for his care. A "good" Samaritan was an oxymoron.

Here is an example of a similar story told with current characters: a member of the Taliban was walking through the South End and saw an American who had been mugged and left for dead. He stopped, and hailed a cab and took this man to Massachusetts General, where he offered his own Blue Cross card to pay for his care. The point is that this man who was despised went far beyond what anyone would expect. Jesus says that this is what God wants us to do, something extraordinary, to go beyond the call.

How do we hear God's call today? Do we drop everything like Abraham and move far away? Do we risk our lives like Esther or Moses? What is Jesus' message for us?

In the first place, Jesus says God is calling us to be human.

The Samaritan was a good man because he did not look away. Quite simply, he was a good person, because he saw someone in need, and did not worry about whether he was a Jew or not. He did not think as much about what separated him from the man, as what connected the two of them. When he came down the road he responded with simple human compassion. The Priest and the Levite may not have been bad men, but they were pre-occupied, so busy or self-important that they lost the human connection to other people. They failed to recognize the Israelite victim as another child of God, in need. It is that simple. For the people in the Bible who hear God calling them- that call does not come like a royal summons, or a brilliant document. It comes like a vision in the night when they feel vulnerable, or a nudge from a mentor, or in a rainbow that takes their breath away. People who hear God's call don't insulate themselves from their own human responses. They stay grounded and therefore honest.

A street chaplain from San Rafael in Marin County California wrote recently about his work in *Christian Century*. His description of his work is surprisingly simple. Every Tuesday he convenes a spiritual support group for homeless people. The Wellness Group is made up of people who live in their cars, or sleep in the bushes, or are newly housed. For the last 10 years 25-30 people have been gathering for an hour every Tuesday morning to pray together, to meditate, and discuss a passage from scripture. Then they have a meal together. The meals started with his idea of serving nourishing soup and bread, but the homeless folks took over the menu and they like to cook pulled pork and coconut curry. Sometimes 75 people show up for the lunch. Someone volunteered to take care of recycling. Everyone helps clean the space, without any prompting from Chaplain Paul. He writes " in this political and social climate the greatest act of service I can do is to provide opportunities for people in the community to serve each other."

"Over time we all forget that service is what we human beings are meant to do. We forget Jesus' charge to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We forget the prophets who call us to open our cupboards to

hungry people and provide shelter for those who are homeless. The culture of competition combines with fears of scarcity to overwhelm many people in supposedly stable situations...Each Tuesday in San Rafael we see firsthand what happens when we pool our resources and share our love. ...and create sacred space.” {“Feeding and being fed” by Paul Gaffney *Christian Century*, September 18, 2013. P. 13)

Jesus says, God calls us to be human.

In the second place the story of the Good Samaritan reminds us to pick our battles. One of the things I like most about this story is that the Good Samaritan sets limits on his compassion. He is generous, but he is clear about how much he can do and what he cannot do.

He took care of the man who was injured, but then he resumed his own journey. He finds help, but then he leaves the man at an inn. Though he must have taken a detour that day, he did not cancel his trip altogether. Though he was delayed, he was not derailed. He left the mugging victim at an inn, and then instructed the innkeeper to care for him, until his business brought him back that way.

This is such an important point, and so easily glossed over, that I want us to pause and take it in. It is very tempting to imagine that a good person does everything for everybody. It is tempting to imagine that you are not doing enough until you are flat out. That is a recipe for burn out. But the Bible does not require that level of extreme commitment. Instead, it is full of examples of people who set limits in order to continue to serve again and again. Jesus says good people set limits. God needs us to be on this servant journey for a long time, and guard against the temptation to have our compassion become a flash in the pan. Jesus’s story makes it very clear that virtuous people pace themselves.

Finally, you don’t have to worry about hearing God’s call. After a month of sermons on this topic you may think that you need to work hard to find a burning bush, somewhere. **When you hear God’s call**

you won't have to ask if it's a call, you will know. If you remain open, and honestly curious you will know when a project or a person's need is an authentic summons.

In the story the Good Samaritan does not pause to consider his options. He does not agonize about what to do. He is just clear about what he wants to do. Those moments when there is clarity are true gifts from God. You see a need; you get an inspiration; or you are suddenly impatient with not responding, so you know. You just know this call is for you. When you are ready it will happen. Maybe it already has.

- You may be the one of your siblings who decides to take care of an aging parent. All your motivations do not have to be pure to make it a good experience. Maybe you take extra care of your parent because you know it is your turn, or because no one else will.
- You may be the one who decides to help a child who needs someone to believe in him.
- Maybe you decide to reach out to a neighbor who is lonely or isolated or awkward, and you seem to be the only one who sees it, or the only one she trusts.
- Maybe you promised yourself that when you retired you will volunteer at a hospice.
- Maybe you are overwhelmed by the news this week that our global temperature is rising and you don't know what to do but you decide to ride your bike to work.
- Maybe you have always wanted to teach your children about outreach so you decide to help us out at the community dinners on Tuesday nights.

Last Wednesday night a medical student was celebrating that he passed his Board exams, so he had a few drinks and went to take the subway home, but when he got to the Orange Line in North Station he must have been more drunk than he realized and he fell right off the platform and onto the tracks. Within seconds three people had jumped off the platform to help him. One man came from the other side of the station, and cross the southbound tracks going in the other direction to get him. The

transportation officials assured everyone that the trains had been stopped and no one was in any real danger, but when reporters asked these good Samaritans why they had stopped to help a stranger, they all said they never gave it a thought. It was instinctive. They just knew what they had to do.

Let us pray....Lord help us to listen to your call in our lives. Lord we offer you the stirrings in us – our hopes, our dreams, and our ambitions. We also offer you our restlessness, and our fears.

Guide us, Heavenly Father, into the breathtaking empty space of the door you are opening. Amen.