

Luke 5: 1-11

Hearing the Call: The Call of Peter

Sunday October 5, 2014

©Rev. Dr. Susan E. Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our sermons will be on the topic of vocation. When most of us hear the word vocation we think of career counseling, or job fairs. We may think of books that help people find the right careers like *What Color is your Parachute?*. If you grew up in a Roman Catholic parish and attended mass with any regularity then you know that whenever the church had Vocation Sunday it was the day when the priest would talk about the need for new vocations. When he started that sermon you knew he was hoping to find young men and women, or boys and girls who aspired to be priests or nuns. The word vocation comes from the Latin root *vocare*, meaning "to call".

If you look at the Bible there are many stories about people who were called by God. All the patriarchs had an experience of hearing God's voice. The story of Samuel tells of a small boy who actually heard God calling in the night. When he heard the voice calling "Samuel, Samuel..." He woke and went in to Eli because he assumed that Eli was calling, but the old man told him to go back to sleep. This happened two more times and then Eli realized that the call was real but not from anyone in the house; it was coming from God. Abraham heard God calling in the night. Moses heard God at a burning bush. Mary saw the angel Gabrielle calling her to a new destiny. Jesus called all of his disciples.

But one of my favorite stories about Jesus is the story of the way that he called Peter. It is the story we just read, and I believe it has a lot to tell us about the call of God in our lives even now. Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, God calls each of us. In Matthew's gospel there is a very different story about Jesus calling the disciples. There he walks along the Sea and calls the disciples and they drop their nets in the middle of the workday and leave everything to follow him. That story never made much sense to me. Here in Luke, Jesus calls his disciples by coming to the place where they work as fishermen and getting into the boat. He needs the boat at first to be a floating podium. Those hills formed a natural amphitheater and when the crowds grew huge Jesus would often push out in a boat and keep on speaking. But after he finished his sermon he decided to stay in Peter's boat and get to know this man. Eventually Jesus suggested that Peter put his net down in deeper waters. Peter was skeptical; he knew the territory and they had not caught anything all night, but he did it to placate Christ. To his astonishment the nets filled so fast they needed an extra boat and more men to haul it all in.

In that moment Jesus did not really call the disciples to change jobs. They remained fishermen all their lives. He did not call them to DO something different. He called them to BE different in the jobs they had chosen. You don't have to be considering the possibility of joining a monastery to hear God's call in your life. You don't have to think of yourself as a very good person to experience Christ's summons. You don't have to be a seasoned church go-er with a record of good deeds a mile long. You don't have to be considering holy order to hear God's call. We believe that everyone is called by God to use your gifts in service to Christ's kingdom.

In the book *Healing the Purpose of Your Life* the authors start with the following story:

Seven year old Connor arrived at breakfast and told his mother, "Mom, I realized I'm here for a very important purpose."

(stifling her amusement, his mother asked) "Do you want to tell me more about that?"

"I don't know my important purpose but I think I could change the world. Then everyone in the whole world is going to know me because of this thing I'm going to do."

"Do you think it's something scientific?"

"I don't know, but I think it's important and the world's going to be better after I do it."

"Well Connor, if I can help let me know."

"OK Mom." {Linn, Dennis, Linn, Sheirla, Linn, Matthew, *Healing the Purpose of Your Life*. New York: Paulist Press, 1999, p. 1.}

We smile because it is so naive, and yet so precious. Connor's insight into the holy purpose in his life is so wonderful, so innocent, and yet so true. UCC minister Lillian Daniels wrote about a dentist named Jim. Jim is a fulltime dentist and part-time licensed minister. He believes that his work as a dentist really connects him to God. "Over the years I have enjoyed caring for families. I have spent many years drying the tears of someone who lost a spouse or loved one, comforting someone facing surgery, listening to someone facing a divorce or laughing about the trials of parenting. When the day is done I pray for all of them." {*This is How We Begin: Devotionals and Prayers to Start Meetings*. Cleveland: Open Waters Publishing, 2013, p. 9.}

It was not what he did but how he did it that changed people's lives. All of us - attorneys, teachers, parents, accountants, bond traders have the ability to change the world we know. Jesus did not ask Peter to be a minister, but a fisherman who wanted to use his fishing skills to change the world.

Jesus got into the boat with these fishermen and told them that he could ride with them for a while. He did not ask them to change their jobs exactly. He used their skills at catching fish to call them to learn how bring people to faith. He wanted to use their skills but take them in a whole new direction.

God calls each of us.

In the second place, God's call may surprise you, or even upset you.

When Peter saw the catch of fish he realized that this man Jesus would change his life. Jesus had the power to see beneath the water, and into the souls of men and women. If Peter really listened to this new call, things would suddenly be different. Quite honestly, none of us really embraces that kind of change. It is scary. When you respond to God's call in your life, you cannot remain the same.

That response is pretty typical. Think of all the paintings where Mary is holding the angel Gabriel at arm's length when the angel tells her what God needs her to do. Most people who hear God's call do not say, "No problem, I'm on it."

This summer when I went to Chautauqua I attended a vesper service where the preacher for the week described her call to ministry. That week the preacher was the Reverend Doctor Cynthia Hale a statuesque African American woman who stands fully six feet three, with a face that many predicted was made for modeling. Dr.Hale was at summer Bible camp when she believed God first called her to be a minister. She was not interested. Then she heard that call again she was a voice major at Rollins College where she admits that her social life was her main priority. The more often she heard this call in her life the more she argued with God. When she prayed about it, she flat out told God "I don't want to be a minister. I'm a girl." You may not be happy with Christ's call. It could well be very upsetting.

Finally, God's call will bring out the best in you.

This summer on my way to Chautauqua I visited several RV trailer places in upstate New York. I met a man selling campers at Campers World outside of Rochester. Troy introduced himself and showed us around and he was such an easy going happy guy that I felt nervous because I knew we would not be buying anything, because it was just too far to haul it back to Cape Cod. Troy told me he

did not care; He was the vice president for sales and had a great sales record but he enjoyed camping so much he simply loved to talk to people about it. He used to sell insurance and it was hard to get up every morning, but when he switched jobs he told me he had never been happier in his life. He liked making a commission but talking about campers did it for him. I told him I would put him in a sermon.

Burnout comes **not** from doing too many things, but from doing things that are not meaningful to us. When we discover our purpose and our path we find wholeness. David Steindl-Rast writes that “The antidote to exhaustion is not necessarily rest. It is wholeheartedness.”

Dr. Hale was the featured preacher at Chautauqua because despite her early reservations, she went on to Duke Divinity School. Plenty of students and professors questioned her call there, because so few women went into the ministry. But Dr. Hale went on to start a church in Decatur Georgia, now the biggest Disciples of Christ Church in America, with 6000 members and an outreach budget of hundreds of thousands of dollars. She has touched the lives of countless people. She is part of president Obama’s team of religious advisors, and she gave the invocation at the Democratic National Convention in 2012.

There was a woman mystic named Agnes Sanford who believed that everyone has a purpose for our lives. Before we are born we sit down with God to talk about how we will be in the world. It is not like we are given an assignment about what to do, but how to be. At the core of our nature, even embedded in our DNA is this piece of conversation from that moment when we were created. At the heart of who we are is this connection to God that points us to our highest purpose. {*Healing the Purpose of Your Life*, p.2-3}

Let us pray: We thank you for the gift of life and dim memory of our first conversations with you. Awaken our hearts and minds again to life's possibility, and help us to hear your call, not once but again and again all life long. Amen.