

“To Be Called”

John 1:43-51

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I am always moved when people tell their story of coming to terms with their calling. Though “calling” is a word often used to refer to a vocation in the ministry of the church, it is certainly not limited to that arena. There have been a number of South Church people, over the years, who have been called into ministry: Lucia Jackson, Anne Alvord, Ryan Henderson, Jonathan Drury, and Katy Wilcox, to name a few. But there are many many others who describe their life work as a “calling,” who are teachers or lawyers or chefs or musicians or social workers or probation officers or day care providers or engineers or politicians or auto mechanics or waitresses or carpenters or astronauts or drill sergeants, or accountants, or tax collectors. To have found a calling is to have found your way into that place where you are using the gifts God has given you for a purpose that God admires.

The Rev. Dr. Otis Moss, Jr., a wise, experienced pastor/preacher talks to seminary students about discerning their “call,” but he could well be talking to a class of investment bankers or real estate agents or medical residents. Dr. Moss says to these budding theologians in a voice that reveals great love as well as great pain, “If there is anything else you can possibly do with your life, do that other thing.” Dr. Moss takes us to the heart of the matter. To have found your calling is to be doing that one thing that you simply must do. It could be brick-laying; it could be kindergarten teaching; it could be painting tobacco barns on Tryon Street; it could be staying at home and raising children. It is that pursuit which is profoundly satisfying because you are using what God has given you to use.

So, I really appreciate it whenever anyone tells their “calling” story because these are all sacred stories.

In my recent correspondence with Frank Manchester in Diamond Head, Mississippi, he reveals what he considers to be a calling. He was raised in Hancock County, Maine. He worked his whole life as a text book salesman. In his retirement, he and MaryAnn moved to Hancock County, Mississippi. There he became involved in the Hancock County Food Pantry as a volunteer. After Hurricane Katrina leveled that building that served groceries to the poor and there seemed to be no one else to resurrect it, Frank reflected on his life history and wondered why he had been allowed to survive the flood and what could possibly be his calling now? He says he reflected on his roots in Hancock County, Maine and how he had landed in Hancock County, Mississippi, and how it was becoming abundantly clear that he is the one called to bring this basic ministry back to life. He can't escape being a Hancock County guy! It is as if Frank had heard that lecture from Dr. Otis Moss. He is doing what he believes God has prepared him to do.

One of the most precious of all movies ever made is the film, Field of Dreams. In this movie, we meet Archibald “Moonlight” Graham, a small town doctor who carries a black bag, makes house calls, is the salt of the earth. In his youth, he had been a promising baseball player. Finally reaching the major leagues, he waits for his first turn at the bat. He can't wait to send that ball a country mile. The manager sends him into the game in the late innings of the last game of the season. He is standing in the on-deck circle. Strike three! The last out is made; the game is over. One thing led to another and the young player never did get to bat in the major leagues. You can imagine the disappointment. He becomes a medical doctor and commits himself to this calling. But late in the movie, when the doctor is now quite old and long-retired, through the mystical story of the film, he gets a second chance to play in a game with real major league players. It is at the Field of Dreams.

But just as he is about to step to the plate, a girl in the stands is choking on a hot dog! He sees clearly what is happening. He sees clearly what is his true calling. He lays down the bat and does instead what God has prepared him to do. It is his calling. He can do no other.

Neither the child, Samuel, nor the adult, Nathanael, discerns his calling on his own. Both require the help of a mentor or a friend or a community. Samuel needed Eli. Nathanael needed Philip and Andrew. That was the case with me, also. I needed Tuck Gilbert. I had these inklings, these stirrings, but lacked confidence to be sure of my strengths. I needed someone I could trust, someone who could be objective, someone who could be totally honest.

I always think of the church as a community where the spiritual gifts God has given to us can be named. Church is a place where one can say to another, “You have a gift for listening. You have a gift for common sense. You have a gift for debating ideas. You have a gift for hospitality. You have a gift for resolving conflict. You have a gift for making people laugh. You have a gift for helping people feel their feelings” We count on each other for naming these gifts. If they don’t get named here, then where will the gifts be named?

I remember being shocked to learn that my great uncle, Frank Beckwith, was a grave digger for the Town of Monson, Massachusetts. I wondered why he hadn’t aspired to something more than that. After all, his sister, my grandmother, was the first woman to graduate from the Monson Academy, had become a first grade teacher, and a force to deal with in the Republican Party. When I finally spoke with Uncle Frank about his career as a grave digger, he spoke to me about death and about how he wasn’t afraid of it and about his relationship with the earth and with headstones and with the care taking of a sacred ground.

And then I was embarrassed that I hadn't seen that this was his calling, that God had given him the gifts for this work, and that he had claimed those gifts! Uncle Frank, who completed the 3rd grade, was my teacher that day.

As I read through the calling stories of Samuel and Nathanael, I thought of so many of you. I thought of so many South Church folks who understand their work as a calling. And I suspect that this is one explanation for how fabulous a congregation this is. We have nurses who recognize their gifts as coming from God. We have social workers who know their compassion is a heavenly gift. We have lawyers who use their God-given gifts to establish justice. We have wait staff who use their smiles to transform a diner's day. We have human resource executives who thank God for their gift of patience. We have public school teachers who know it is their calling. We have physicians who understand their gifts for healing were not gained in medical school alone. We have probation officers who can only do what they do because God walks with them everyday.

When Jesus talks with Nathanael about his calling, he implies that when Nathanael begins to think of his vocation in those terms, in terms of having a calling, he will begin to see things differently, he will see the Creator and the Creator's creation differently. He says Nathanael will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. Angels ascending and descending! This, of course, is a reference to Jacob's ladder. You know that Genesis story! Jacob is all alone in the woods at night. He is fleeing his brother's anger. He doesn't know what the future may hold. In his sleep, Jacob dreams of a ladder. The foot of the ladder is at his stone pillow and the top of the ladder is in the heavens. And angels are ascending and descending upon the rungs of the ladder. He awakens and concludes that God has good things in store for him.

This is precisely what Jesus is saying to Nathanael. You have a calling. God is with you. God is giving you gifts. Use these gifts for a purpose God affirms. And you will move forward with the confidence of Jacob!

I believe God gifts us all with spiritual gifts. God calls us into a church where our gifts are named and affirmed. God invites us to use those gifts for some divine purpose. This is how the text was speaking to me this week. And, as always, I share it with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.