

Answering God's Call

A Reflection on My Call to Ministry

1 Samuel 3:1-10 John 1:43-51
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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God knows each one of us intimately, and God calls each of us, daily, to follow and serve. That's the bottom line and conclusion to today's sermon. It is such an important thing to remember, that I thought I'd begin the sermon with it - just for added emphasis. I hinted at this last Sunday in reflecting how our own baptism is a call to community, marked by authentic relationships that find expression in such attitudes and actions like compassion for others – including for each other here in this congregation.

The biblical readings for this Sunday, from both the Old and New Testaments, are also entwined by themes of God's knowing and calling. These are great themes, regardless of one's theological perspective.

It is often difficult for us, however, to distinguish what we perceive as God's voice (or what I often refer to as the promptings of the Holy Spirit) from all the other voices clamoring for attention in our heads and hearts. For instance, in today's Old Testament passage the young boy Samuel needed help discerning God's call. He kept running into Eli's room thinking it was his mentor, Eli, who was calling out his name. It took Eli's wisdom of the ways of God to discern that what Samuel was experiencing was actually God's call to ministry and service.

I love this element of the story. For how often in our own lives do we find that it is through the help of someone else that we are aided in perceiving our own direction in life? So I encourage you to reflect for a moment, and throughout this coming week, on who have been the 'Eli's' in your life. I can think of several in mine, and I am deeply grateful for their guidance and perception. I will share one such personal story in a few moments.

This passage from 1 Samuel, like all of the 'call stories' in the Bible, also begs the question: How do you listen for and hear God's voice? **A central belief in traditional Protestant Christianity is that each and every one of us is called by God.** That's why on the back of the worship bulletin each Sunday we list the ministers as, "All the members of the church." That's not a mistake. I may be the pastor, but each and every one of us is a minister. Each of us is called by God to follow and serve.

Our annual Session Retreat was held just yesterday. We talked about the topics of calling and discernment. We spent a portion of our time having each Elder discern what area of ministry, or ministry team, she or he felt called to serve. **Discerning such a call, in what I have learned about this process, is primarily tied to where one finds energy and passion. As Presbyterians, we also put a lot of stock in group discernment.** I will later share (during our time of Joys and Concerns) which ministry teams our 12 Elders will be serving this year.

Pastors are also often asked to share how they discerned God calling them into ordained pastoral ministry. The call to ministry is different for each and every one of us.

For some, it is a slow evolution over a long period of time. Some say they knew when they were still quite young that God was calling them to some special service of some kind. Others reveal that the call to ministry took them by complete surprise. **Martin Luther, the great Reformer in the 1500's, referred to God's call as "the hound from heaven that keeps chasing you."** (Not my favorite image of God, but if it fits...)

I haven't shared with you the entire story of my own sense of calling to ordained pastoral ministry, primarily because I haven't been too sure how such a progressive congregation would hear such an evangelical-type of experience. I say evangelical, because that's where I was theologically when I perceived my calling into ordained ministry.

What I think I can say for certain, however, is that **God uses different means to call different people**. It is my fervent belief that **God speaks to us in whatever way is necessary for us to listen and understand. In other words, you can be anywhere along the theological spectrum and still perceive a calling of one sort or another.** For instance, I now discern what I perceive to be God's calling and direction in a different way than I did 25 years ago. And that perfectly okay.

Like many people, I have perceived a variety of calls to serve God (often through the life of the church) at different times in my life. One came in the early 1980s to serve my home church as a sponsor of the Jr. High Youth Group. It wasn't until several years later that I discerned a new call – to attend seminary.

So here's my story. Back in 1986, living just north of Houston in a town called The Woodlands, I became a casualty of the oil industry crisis. Along with tens of thousands of others in the Houston area alone, I lost not only my job but also my 7 ½-year career as a petroleum geologist. In the process, as I have shared with you before, I lost every cent I had ever made or invested, including my house, car, savings account, life insurance policies, retirement accounts, stocks, etc. All were lost or cashed in to simply survive.

It is a simple fact that **the life circumstances that people find themselves in at any given point in their lives plays a direct role into one's sense of calling.** So while I didn't choose to leave my career as a geologist, for example, it nevertheless was an important factor in later discerning a call into ministry.

In the meantime, I got more and more involved in my home church. I was ordained as an Elder in the summer of 1987. And I continued my work with the junior highs, which at first I hated – but then came to be one of the most meaningful parts of my life.

Since I was available to take some time off from the temporary work that I had finally found, I was asked to take the senior high youth group to a week conference at Mo-Ranch Presbyterian Conference Center located out in the middle of nowhere in the beautiful hill country of central Texas.

Since I had only regularly worked with the junior high group, this was a new and somewhat intimidating and daunting experience. On just the second evening of camp the director came to me, around 11:30 p.m., woke me up, and asked if I was the adult youth sponsor of one of the young people, named **David**. I figured she was going to tell me that she was confiscating the radio that he had brought, which was a violation of camp rules. Instead, she said that David had been detected to have alcohol on his breath earlier in the evening by his Small Group leader.

Indeed, David had been drinking and was currently sleeping it off in his room, which was next to mine. I was told by the camp director, and the assistant director who

accompanied her, that I had to wake David and tell him that he had violated the camp covenant and would be sent home in the morning. It was the very first time in Mo-Ranch's history that they actually had to send someone home. And I was the one who had to do it.

That was very hard, especially because I didn't know David well at all. What was harder was calling his mother the next morning and telling her the situation, and when to pick up David at the bus station in Houston. David's family, you see, was one of the original 5 families that started the Presbyterian church there in The Woodlands just eight years before. His dad preached the first sermon, which was in their home, before the arrival of the organizing pastor. They were pillars of the church.

After I put David on the van that would take him to the bus station in Kerrville, I found myself profoundly and very unexpectedly affected. I went off by myself to an isolated spot in the camp to reflect upon the situation. Uncharacteristically for me at the time, I began to weep, and hard. I didn't even really know this young person, so why was it affecting me so dramatically?

What I discerned was that I was experiencing just a small fraction of the **compassion and love** that God had for David, and for all people – regardless of how much trouble they get themselves into. I had never quite felt this way before.

While still sitting there, I had gut feeling that God wanted me to write David a letter, telling him how much he was loved and cared for by God, his family and friends, and by his new friend, me. I was a bit uncomfortable doing so, not knowing how David would respond to it. I also wasn't used to putting myself into vulnerable positions. But I wrote a 3-page letter and gave it to him when the rest of us returned from camp at the end of the week.

From the other Sr. Highs in the youth group I learned that contrary to appearances at church, David had lots of problems at home, especially in communicating with his parents. He was one of the most popular people in high school, and he partied way too often and way too hard. He tended to tie his own identity around those things.

But that single experience of compassion was not the end of the story. One month later, David, his mom and dad, sister, and older brother were returning from a vacation in Colorado. While passing through the Panhandle of West Texas around 2:00 a.m. in the morning, David's older brother, who was driving the van and wearing a pair of headphones, didn't hear the train whistle blowing as they crossed the railroad tracks. The train hit the passenger side of the van, instantly killing the father and David, who was lying between the seats, sound asleep. David's mother and sister were badly hurt, but in time they recovered. David's older brother, Brian, walked out of the driver's seat unharmed. Needless to say, this tragic accident had a profound affect on our congregation.

To everyone's surprise, Brian was at the worship service at church the very next Sunday. I had not met him before, because he had previously moved away to go to college. For some reason Brian came up to me after the service and introduced himself. I was surprised he knew who I was. He wanted me to know something that was very special to him and his family. Underneath David's pillow at home, they found the letter that I had given David the month before. Evidently, David read it again before the family left for vacation. Brian thanked me for what that letter must have meant to David and how much it meant to the family now.

At that very moment I interpreted all this as how God had used me to minister to David and his family, and how important it was that I went with that gut feeling that I perceived God was calling me to share my feelings with David in a letter. From that moment on I knew that working with young people wasn't just something I was volunteering for at church; it was a ministry, blessed by God.

But even that wasn't the moment I felt called to become a pastor. One full year later, in 1988, I was back at that same Sr. High Youth Conference at Mo-Ranch. I had agreed to serve as a Small Group leader. I was asked to do so the year before by the person who was that year's assistant director, who was standing with the director when I was told about having to send David home. That person was the Rev. Ray Hickman, a former Interim Pastor here at College Hill and currently the Executive Director of Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry. It's a small world after all. Ray was certainly one of the 'Eli's' in my life.

Like I mentioned, I still hadn't discerned a calling in my life as it pertained to a job or profession. So one morning I sat on a rock ledge, looking at the massive limestone cliffs across the Guadalupe River, that runs through the camp, and for at least the one-millionth time prayed for an answer of what to do with my life.

Now here's the even more evangelical part. As I sat there, my mind instantly cleared of all the thoughts running through it. What was left was a question. "Will you go to seminary?" Even though it had been two years since I lost my career, I had never felt a serious tug to go into ordained pastoral ministry.

I immediately flooded my mind with all the reasons why I could *not* - primarily financial, but also the presumed fact that I would never pass Greek and Hebrew, nor overcome my actual intense fear being in front of a group of people. It was like an entire committee of voices in my head all throwing out reasons of why that was such a stupid idea.

Then unexpectedly, my mind just cleared again. And back came the same simple question, "Will you go to seminary?" I truly felt that this question in my mind came directly from God. Not an audible voice, but just as clear as if someone standing next to me had asked that question. The next thought that ran through my mind was if I answered "yes" to that question, then indeed it would somehow come to pass. So I hesitated, not at all sure I wanted to go to seminary or become a pastor. But there was also that gut feeling that there was no other answer for my life than yes.

So I said yes. And then I prayed for confirmation. That's looking to someone or something else to confirm you haven't lost your mind and were just hearing other voices in your head. Within the hour I was walking with another adult small group leader at camp. She was the same leader who reluctantly felt obligated to turn David in the year before when she smelled alcohol on his breath. She had since heard of the tragic events and its impact on our congregation, and on me.

Knowing that I was searching for direction in my life, Beth simply mentioned, "Todd, have you ever thought about going to seminary." I was blown away. I told her of the experience I just had sitting on that stone ledge. She was blown away, too.

But here's what sealed the deal. Later that afternoon, still looking for more affirmation (as if that hadn't been enough), I was sitting in 'the rapids' in the Guadalupe River with many others attending the conference. I found a strange rock. I keep it to this day on my bookshelf in my study. Here it is. It's a piece of limestone bedding, about an inch thick, with another rock that has protruded through it. I'm not too sure if you can see it from where you are sitting, but the rock sticking through is in

the shape of a triangle. Like the triangle in our stained glass window here in this sanctuary, I thought about how it represented the Trinity. And as I was looking at this strange rock it was as if I heard God tell me: 'You used to study geology. Now you will be studying theology.'

And the rest, as they say, is history. Well, that's my story. What's yours? What's ours as a congregation? You may never be called to go into ordained pastoral ministry, but each of you, nonetheless, are called to minister and serve. One way to do that may be in volunteering to serve on one of our congregation's ministry teams, or to sing in the choir.

God is calling you to take stock of your gifts and to listen for God's voice – that inner prompting – as well as to the invitations of other people. God is calling you and me to a life of service, to a life of ministry. It's up to you and I, like the prophets and disciples of old, to decide how to respond. How will you answer the call? How will this congregation?

Amen.