

“Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works”

Sometimes the collect, that prayer that is supposed to collect all of our prayers and offer them to God as we begin our worship service really does sum up the readings. That is certainly the case today when we are offered the opportunity to reflect on what it means to be called by God.

We have all been called by God, the very fact that you are here this morning is a testament to not only your call but your response to that call. The Greek word *ecclesia* which came to mean “the church” should really be understood as a “gathering-of-people-that-have-been-called-together”, meaning people-who-have-been summoned-for-a-purpose.

We always have a choice in how we answer that call although as the story of Jonah suggests, God can be pretty relentless when it comes to tracking us down. When our Old Testament reading begins, Jonah has received the word of God for the second time. He ran away from it the first time. He ran right onto a ship from which he was tossed into the sea where he was swallowed by a whale. After praying to God for deliverance the whale vomited him up onto dry land. After these experiences it is no wonder that Jonah decided to respond more appropriately to God’s second call. Now mind you, Jonah responded reluctantly and that’s a whole other story but for now it is enough that Jonah responded.

But Jonah is not the one responding to God’s call. Those people of Nineveh responded too. The king believed and proclaimed that everyone including the beasts, the flocks, and the herds were to fast and repent of their evil ways. And so they did. But we don’t know what this meant for their future lives, it’s not like the story tells us that they became followers of the Lord but in that moment God chose not to destroy them. For those of us who have responded we struggle ever day with what it means to answer the call because we responded to the call to follow Jesus and responding to Jesus can have some radical consequences.

In our gospel reading we hear that Peter and Andrew left their nets behind while James and John not only left their nets behind but their father with whom they were working. The gospel doesn’t tell us what John and Zebedee’s father thought of their decision.

Most of our responses to God’s call don’t impact us that suddenly, although in some churches the moment of conversion is emphasized as the critical moment of faith, as Episcopalians we understand faith to be more of a process, something that we need to grow into, something that needs to be nurtured and cultivated and occasionally pruned over time.

Paul speaks to the reality of call in his letter to the Corinthians. Those who responded to the call in the first generation after the death of Jesus expected his imminent return. Paul is explaining that it is not business as usual. Although the injunction to ignore spouses and mourning and joy and shopping as if they did not exist sounds ridiculous to us it’s partially because we read only a portion of the passage. Just before the verse we read today Paul has provided explicit instructions on how to be faithful in marriage and concludes by saying “... let

each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you". So he is not really saying that the ongoing response to call requires abandoning all the "nets" of our lives. On the contrary he is saying that part of responding into God's call involves living the fullest life into which we have been called.

So here we are, we have all been called and we have all said yes but what do we do next? Therein lies the rub. After saying yes we want to do as Jesus would do, we want to live into our baptismal covenant, with love and respect for the dignity of every human being. But what do we do, how do we know what to do, how to make decisions and prioritize where to spend our energy, where to commit our resources? Most of us probably have far more "calls" and demands on our time and resources than we can possible answer.

Douggs here has lost his house because the pipes froze and flooded the building; he is asking for someplace to live. Another woman came to me for assistance with a medical bills, another man came running up to me as I was pulling out of the garage demanding a food card. There are parishioners who are struggling with a variety of issues and that's before I try to respond to the needs of my friends and family, let alone the relentless demands of the world for everyone in need: floods, forest fires, famines, wars ...they all make an impact.

What do we do? Sometimes our first reaction, our gut reaction is the right one but what about those times when we know we need to be pushed, need to step out of our comfort zone and take a risk? Sometimes we need to be more generous, sometimes we need to grow a backbone and set boundaries and other times we need to wait and see, to hold the tension between multiple options.

If you are listening to this and feeling that I haven't given a satisfactory answer, I don't blame you. The real answer lies in what we read in the bishop's call for a Covenant of Prayer, an email that we distributed last week in which he asks that we spend one hour of prayer each day, one day of prayer each month, and eight days of prayer each year.

I know that sounds extreme, and if you even considered it you might have spent most of your time responding that this is not practical and dismissed it out of hand. But what he is getting at, just like what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Corinthians, is changing our stance towards prayer, about finding ways to deliberately incorporate prayer into our lives. We talked bit about this in our vestry meeting the other night. Most of us think about prayer as praying for other people, what we call intercessory prayer. And we all do that individually and corporately. I assume you all also pray for yourselves. But this is a bit different this is about listening to God, not talking to God. This is about sitting with God and giving God the space to talk with us. We need to do both of course but that listening to God can be difficult. We find we have so many things to do, so many demands that we have difficulty being still. And if this makes sense to you and you would like to try, then let me also say that you don't start off by sitting for an hour with God and expecting God to show up. In all likelihood you would start planning a grocery list or falling asleep. Neither of those are bad but they are not the point of this exercise. So start small. Find 5 minutes where you can be in silence and just be still let your mind relax. Believe me 5 minutes of relaxing is hard work! There is more to be said about this

but it is a way to begin and a way to invite God into the many decisions we have to make. It may not make the decisions any easier but they will be grounded in the knowledge and love of God.

The collect for one of the Sundays in October begins "Almighty and everlasting God, you are always more ready to hear than we to pray, and to give more than we either desire or deserve..." That's right, God is always more ready to connect with us than we are to connect with God. That call stuff doesn't just happen once. We need to keep paying attention to God in order to stay grounded and focused on what is important.

Richard Rohr, a Roman Catholic writer on spirituality said in one of his reflections (December 29, 2015) "*We're already in the presence of God. What's absent is awareness.*" That awareness is what we want to cultivate in prayer. That is what the bishop is calling us to and for good reason.

Our psalmist provides the underlying support for this approach to prayer when he says:

"For God alone my soul in silence waits...put your trust in him always, O people, pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge."

Let me know how it goes.

Amen