

Calling: a Matter of Faith, Hope and Trust.

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Presented on June 22, 2008, at Saxapahaw UMC, Saxapahaw, NC. Lectionary reading: Matthew 9:9-26, Palm 33, and Genesis 12:1-9 (*The New Revised Standard Version*, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the [National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America](#). Used by permission. All rights reserved.)

Today, I have the privilege and the responsibility of preaching a sermon on the Sunday that follows the departure of our former pastor, Marc Rickabaugh, and precedes our new pastor, Rev. David Harriss. We are in a time of transition and change. We as a congregation are crossing a bridge on our Sojourn of faith. We have been traveling with one leader, Marc, and we are getting ready to join with another leader, David. Each man brings with him certain graces, gifts and faults as they both struggle to live authentically the call that God placed upon their lives. Yet I think that we all need to take this time to reflect not only on the call that God has placed upon the lives of our leaders, but also on the call that God has placed upon our own lives.

Within the church there is a long tradition of recognizing the call of God on the lives of our clergy men and women; however, the vast majority of the leaders in our church are not ordained. They are like you and I, ordinary laypeople who get up every morning, work secular jobs, volunteer in our congregations and communities, and serve our neighbors. We, too, are called to ministry, but it is to a different ministry than our clergy. Clergymen and women are called to lead, teach, preach, and administer the sacraments. They, though flawed human beings, attempt through the grace of God to live as examples of Christ’s love and compassion. Sometimes they fail miserably. Sometimes they succeed brilliantly. Most of the time the best that can be said about them is that they lived authentically as they loved us, prayed with us, mourned with us, celebrated with us, and marked the liturgical seasons with sermons, prayers, songs, and sacraments. This is their calling.

Our calling, though related, is not necessarily the same. Our calling is to live the gospel in our everyday lives. We, ordinary laypeople, get up every morning, eat, drink, head off to work, raise our children, care for our neighbors, work overtime, make sure our mothers and fathers are doing well, cry with our sisters, tease our brothers, change a strangers flat tire, and help a child find their lost parent. Some how, we find time to witness to strangers the love of Christ simply by living our lives with compassion, faith, love and mercy.

These two callings, as clergy and laity, come with certain social expectations. We expect the well-spoken, well educated gentleman to become a clergyman. We know that the son of the minister will follow in her footsteps. We understand that the daughter of the matriarch of the church is being groomed for the same role. But we have a hard time seeing the potential preacher in the thug on the corner. We know that the exotic dancer down at the gentleman’s club is not Sunday school teacher material. And there is no way that God would even consider calling a 56 year old woman to the ordained ministry.

But you see, our expectations, both for our clergy and for ourselves are not the expectations God has for us. Our God is a God of inappropriate choices and unlikely heroes. God chooses to call people who are not what society would call the best candidates for the job. God uses extraordinarily, failed human beings to transform our understanding of calling as they themselves are transformed by the grace of God.

Today's lesson shows two men who are the least expected examples of wise choices for leaders. In the Old Testament reading we have Abram, a 75 year old man with a barren wife, Sarai, and a "ne're do well nephew", Lot, who is Abrams only heir. God comes to Abram and tells him clearly to, "*Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3).*" This is an amazing statement for many reasons. First, God is telling Abram, to fly in the face of custom and leave his extended family and the family lands. In a community defined by family connections, bloodlines, and tribes, leaving the community is a radical and dangerous act. The extended family offers security and community. The tribe protects its members and ensures that the elders, such as Abram and Sarai, are cared for in their old age. This call required that Abram and Sarai leave all that they knew, their entire support system, and strike out on their own.

How utterly inappropriate.

Second, the call makes a promise that is unbelievable. Abram, this 75 year old man, and his equally elderly wife, Sarai, have no children, and they are told that they will be the founders of a great nation. Based upon earlier scriptures, we know that Sarai is beyond childbearing years. We know that they cannot have children, yet God promises that this couple will be the parents, grand parents and great-grand parents. They will be the foundation of a great nation that will be a blessing to all the world.

How very unlikely.

Likewise, In the gospel reading we read, "*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. ¹⁰And as he [Jesus] sat at dinner in the house [which belonged to Matthew], many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples (Matthew 9:9-10)*". Matthew, a tax collector, was a man who's job description is little more than a state sanctioned extortion. Tax collectors are known to for cheating people of their money and for working for an oppressive and abusive government. Everyone knows he and those like him are not the sort of people who God wants or uses, because Tax collectors are more interested in money than they are in pleasing God.

Again how utterly inappropriate and unlikely a choice.

Yet, both men have an unexpected encounter with God who literally orders each of them to act. “Go there!” “Follow me!” Leave all that you know. Change your priorities. Be transformed into someone who will bless the whole world.

This is an absurd and difficult calling. Most would refuse or believe we misunderstood what was asked.

Remarkably, these men follow the call of God. Moses left his home, packed up his possessions, and he and his wife and heir went where God sent him. Matthew went with Jesus, invited Jesus and his disciples into his home, and then was so transformed by the experience, that he invited all of his friends to join him for dinner, so that they too could experience the transformative power of Christ. Both of these men’s actions fly in the face of social expectations, and they radically alter their lives by following the orders of God. By doing so, they become examples of how God calls those whom society would least expect to become the leaders of the church.

So, what can we learn from their examples?

First, as we have seen, the call of God can come to anyone, in any place. God is the God of inappropriate choices and unlikely heroes. God can and will use anyone in any situation of life to achieve God’s ends.

Second, the call of God requires action. We must move out of our comfort zones. We must do the unexpected, and we must respond in ways that will not be socially accepted. In our Gospel reading today, there are three different instances where Jesus was questioned or rebuked for his actions. The Pharisees wanted to know why Jesus and his disciples ate with sinners (Matt. 9:11). John’s disciples wanted to know why Jesus and his followers did not fast like good Jews (Matt. 9:14), and the mourners at the dead girl’s house laughed at him because Jesus said the girl was not dead (Mat. 9:24). Our call may not require us to leave family and friends and move to a new location, but it will, inevitably, call us to become transformed into someone that the rest of society will not understand.

Third, God’s call requires us to have faith. Sometimes it is a blind faith, like the faith of Abram who leaves to go to a land he does not know to follow a calling that is improbable, yet terribly desired: Children in his old age, a nation founded upon his heirs, and the opportunity to bless the entire world. There is no way for these to come to pass save by the grace of God, yet Abram goes.

Sometimes the faith that is required of us is one that acts in spite of the odds or known consequences like the woman in the gospel reading who has faith that if she just touches Jesus’ robe, she will be healed. The scripture tells us, “*This woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years, came up behind [Jesus] and touched the fringe of his cloak, ²¹for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well(Matt 9:20-21.)”* This woman was an outcaste because she was ritually unclean. She should not have been anywhere near

Jesus, let alone touch him. But she had faith that this man offered her healing, wholeness and access to the community again. She was faithful, and her faith was rewarded. *“Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well (Matt. 9:22).”*

Fourth, the call requires us to have hope. Hope in the unseen, hope that all will be well, hope that defies logic and custom, and hope that is founded upon our relationship with God. The call that God placed upon Abram returned to Abram the hope of children and of a better future. The Call of Jesus upon Matthew gave Matthew the hope of rejoining the community from which he had separated himself. This hope is based upon God’s love. Today’s Psalter says, *“²²Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you (Pslm 33:22).”* God’s love for us provides us with the basis for our hope, as we live the life that God calls each of us to live. We are loved, therefore we are hopeful. In turn we are able to love others and become hope to the world. This love is based upon trusting in the steadfastness of God’s promise to us. *“¹⁸Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, ¹⁹to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. ²⁰Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. ²¹Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name (Psm 33:18-21).”* Trusting, faithfulness, and hope are our response to the love of God and the foundation for our ability to respond to the call of God in our lives.

As Christians, we are all called people. Each and every one of us, regardless of our age, education or station in life, is called by God to do something amazing and shocking. We are called to act, we are called to live our faith, and we are called to be hopeful as we are loved by God and trust in his promise to us to be with us on our journey of faith.

Who knows, maybe one of God’s inappropriate choices and unlikely heroes is sitting amongst us today.