

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

May 5, 2019
Third Sunday of Easter

John 21:1-19
Acts 9:1-20
Psalm 30
Revelation 5:11-14

There is a curious concept that we talk a lot about in religious circles. It's one of the things that we often point to as the moment that changed our life, the series of events that led us down a path that we never anticipated, the person who made us think about our life differently. Out of those moments often comes a redirection, a reevaluation of our values and priorities, a coming to terms with our religious commitments.

We refer to it as "call". The noun, not the verb. In clergy circles, we spend months in discernment groups during the ordination process to deeply consider our call – that pull from God that says, I need you to do something that maybe you haven't thought of before. And then... it starts to nag at you...no matter how often you turn away or how often you make excuses, it keeps coming back into your heart. That's call. And this call doesn't have to end in ordination, although it did for me. For some, it may be getting involved in community outreach, or mentoring kids in need. For others it may be teaching a bible study or becoming more active in leading worship. While for others, it may be committing more time to prayer or visiting friends and neighbors who are alone.

Call comes about in so many ways...and it's personal for each of us. But, I'm here to tell you...it's also undeniable that God is at one time or another going to nudge you forward to serve God more fully. The interesting question or observation will be how you respond when that nudge comes.

I love that this week we get to read about three call stories in our text...Peter, Paul, and Ananias. Peter – the guilt ridden denier of Jesus in whom Jesus sees so much potential in Peter that he keeps gently calling Peter forth over and over again – Peter, do you love me? Then feed my sheep. And then there is Paul, the ominous persecutor of the church who got the lightning bolt call from God that literally blinded him and sent him to his knees in order that he might immediately turn from his ways so that he could become one of the greatest advocates for the Christian faith. And, then there's Ananias, the one whom God called forth to do work Ananias didn't really want to do (to give that terrifying blessing to Saul – his enemy) but Ananias trusted in God's wisdom and vision for him and followed.

Most of us wish we could have one of those lightning bolt moments – when the path forward is clear and we throw everything else aside to do what God wants us to do. However, I have a feeling most of us are more like Peter....who need a lot of reassurance to begin using his gifts or Ananias who thinks he has a better plan and has to wrestle with what he is being asked to do. Most of us will point to months or years of wrestling, of second guessing ourselves or simply ignoring the call altogether.

If I described my own call story – it would be somewhere between years of denial, second guessing and a whole lot of hesitation. It took years...decades actually for me to fully understand what God was leading me to do. I remember as a little girl wanting to preach but in the Baptist church there was no place for me to imagine myself in that role. So, I would put my parents through the painstaking task of listening to me preach at home, trying to emulate Preacher Price as he lifted his bible and talk of sin and salvation. But the only women I saw living out a call in the church back then were either choir directors (I couldn't sing a note) or Sunday school teachers (I wasn't crafty) or church secretaries (I didn't like to type). So, I gave up my preaching aspirations. Years went by.

You all know how much I loved church as a young person. I went all of the time but I never once heard the word seminary. I had no clue how a preacher became a preacher because no one talked to girls about things like that. In high school, the best I could do was read my bible and go to youth group. I knew that there was nowhere I would rather be. So I did what I could. I participated.

In college, I went to a campus ministry group. I met folks of other denominations and realized that faith was much more expansive than I had realized. Still, there were no female role models but the nudge forward never left me. It manifested in the idea that I was simply to keep going, keep studying, keep participating. So, I did for many years. I built my faith. But I wanted to do more.

In my mid-20's, I had the opportunity to work at Union Presbyterian Seminary in development and fundraising. I thought...I may not be a church leader but I can help raise money for other church leaders. That seemed to appease my nudge for a while. And during those years at Union I finally started to see women being ordained. But they seemed so smart (much smarter than me). They knew more about the bible, more about life, more about everything. I felt completely inadequate. I doubted myself.

4 years later I took a big step and started to lead a children's programs at my church. I sat on our preschool's board and led our women's group. I was no voice of expertise; I was simply a willing volunteer.

But, one day, I finally got the courage to consider seminary for myself. I was living in New Jersey at the time. Camden has started preschool. I had some time on my hands but had no clue what God wanted of me. So I prayed...a lot. And this idea of seminary kept resurfacing. I applied to Union Seminary in New York (the only school I applied to) and I will never forget when the acceptance letter arrived. I thought well...God...this is it. I guess I have to do this but I have no clue what it will lead to. I enrolled, sponsored by no denomination, completely unaffiliated, and clueless about the outcome. But...I was certain beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had placed me there. So, I said...here I am God. Take me. Let's see what happens.

It was the best leap of faith I have ever taken. A leap of trust. A leap of hope. A leap of commitment to an unknown purpose. But I followed the call. You all know the rest...I landed at the University of Richmond to serve in college chaplaincy. Still unordained but committed to being a willing servant of God.

However, I kept noticing 2 things...whenever I was in a group of religious leaders, I was more often than not, the only female and the only non-ordained person around the table. Two things I was not happy with. And, guess what happened? I entered the ordination process, yet still determined to stay in higher education. 4 years later, I ran into Randy Hollerith, former rector of St. James' in Richmond and now Dean of the National Cathedral in DC. He stopped me and asked...Emily, have you ever thought about parish ministry. I stood there speechless. I could think of no reason to say no. My call moved forward.

And then one day my Bishop said, Emily I think you should consider going to a rural parish. You have something to offer. I moved forward another step.

From my first attempt at preaching at age 8 to standing here with you at Grace at age 46. That's how long this call process has been. Do the math...that's 38 years.

I tell you this story because it's important for you to know that your call is ever unfolding. But, called you certainly are...at every age and at every stage, you have something to offer. Each of us has a gift, a purpose and God is working within you to do things you may never have imagined. Your job is to keep listening and to keep saying yes when you feel your heart pulling you forward.

However, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't give you a word of warning...following your call, living into your gifts is not always easy. It can be frustrating and tiring. You will get disillusioned...are you doing the right thing, does it make a difference? You will at one time or another find yourself wrestling and doubting and wanting to avoid that call all together. A life of faithful service has its ups and downs. It is after all, an unlikely journey.

But as Paul Walasky, professor emeritus of biblical studies at Union Presbyterian Seminary stated in his commentary on Acts we are to, "turn our faces toward God's future...and enter the process of completing God's joy by expanding God's love in the world." What a beautiful definition of call.

Completing God's joy. Expanding God's love. That's the heart of call. And when you remember that all of your tasks – great and small are built upon the knowledge that God has a purpose for you, then your own joy expands. Your own commitment to your faith and to your community flourishes. Following your call will be one of the most fulfilling (if not the most fulfilling) thing you will ever do. So listen. Be ready. Take one step forward, year after year, allowing your life to unfold into God's beautiful creation. Amen.