

Callings

19-Jan-2020

A young man is on his way back to law school after visiting his parents.

He was sure to be a good lawyer: the oldest child in his large family, he was blessed with an outsized personality, was charmingly charismatic and maniacally energetic. He was a galvanizing speaker. And above all, he was utterly uncompromising. To oppose was his joy.

Although conflict with others was his forte, his conflict extended inward. He did not like law school, and he had been there eight years. He was there primarily because his father wanted him to be there. He suffered cold sweats, nausea, constipation, crushing headaches, ringing in his ears, together with depression, anxiety, and a general feeling that, as he put it, the angel of Satan was beating him with his fists.

This night, on his way home, was a stormy night, furious with thunder and lightning. He was terrified. And he was already in a bad way emotionally, as a friend of his had recently been stabbed to death. And he wasn't dealing with it well.

A person seemingly always in crisis. He is like us, isn't he? Only likely more self-aware and much more honest. With all our information about all the terrible crises going on in the world, if we had the *sensitivity* of this young man, we would all likely to be as mad as hatters,. But we have all gotten very good at the art of ignoring. I know I have. I hear but I do not internalize. We feel helpless and so we don't even bother thinking of how we might be of some help. We are sure it is not an angel of Satan beating us with his fists because we don't believe in a Satan, much less his angels. Most of all, we are good at finding distractions.

A bolt of lightning hit just a few feet away from him, with an immediate deafening explosion of thunder. In a moment of fear--perhaps greater fear than what we would allow ourselves to feel--he called out to St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, and said if he were delivered from this storm, he would become a monk.

Many people make deals with God. I know I have. And many people do not keep their part of the deal. But this young man did. Against the furious objections of his father, he entered a monastery a few days later.

Today's passage from I Corinthians chapter 1 is a passage about calling. The same Greek word is used *four times* to talk about four types of calling, and as we will spending a lot of time this year *talking* and *thinking* about discernment and calling, it's important for us to do it with the biblical view of calling, with this passage—among others—as the *context* for understanding calling.

Not in the same order as the passage, but here goes.

- "Paul [is] *called* to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.
- The Corinthian believers were "*called* to be saints," namely, holy people.
- The Corinthian believers were "*called* into the fellowship of God's Son."
- And finally, the Corinthians "*call* on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours...."

The calling of leadership. The calling of salvation. The calling of holiness. And calling on God. That is the context for all Christian discernment and it's a context that I urge you make a centerpiece of your thoughts in the year 2020.

The call of holiness. It was the calling of holiness that caused the most trouble to the young monk, Martin Luther. (Some of you probably already guessed that he was the young man that we've been talking about.)

His superior in the monastery advised him to study the mystics, following their path of surrender to the love of God. But Luther knew Leviticus 19:2: "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." Quoted by Peter in I Peter 1: "But just as he who *called* you is holy, so be holy in all you do..." (I Pt 1:15). Luther knew God's standards, and knew that God's standards reflected God's nature, and knew that God's nature was pure and could not be defiled.

His superior counseled him to surrender to the love of God. But this young monk, full of self-examination, full of the discipline of prayer, full of passion--mostly painful passion--discovered his *anger* against God. Years later, commenting on his reading of Scripture as a young friar, Luther spoke of his rage at the description of God's righteousness: "I did not love, yes, I *hated* the righteous God who punishes sinners." Luther was certain that he would not be judged worthy

The eventual solution was an inversion: not that the faith that God loves comes from the works that God loves, but that the works that God loves comes from the faith that God starts. "Oh Lord, command what you will but grant what you command," wrote St. Augustine. We, too, can pray, "If you want something from me, ask. But be prepared, O God, to give me what you want from me."

The call to holiness is a *real* call, and the demands of God are *real* demands, for *all* of us: to throw sin out of our lives just as quickly as we throw out milk that is past its due date. To show mercy. "We can no more separate works from faith," said Luther, "than heat and light from fire."

The call of salvation. The Jewish people were, and we Christians are people of *hearing*. The Greek gods and Greek religion were things of *seeing*: of seeing the image of the invisible God; of seeing the temples and the statues; of seeing the rituals of the mystery cults that reenacted Persephone's ascent every year from the underworld to bring spring again.

"When you received the word of God," writes Paul to the Thessalonians, "you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe" (I Thess 2:13). Jews and Christians are about *hearing*, and about the *word*. To be *called* is to be *called* by the word, and to discern is to discern in and through and by the word, and if the Church is ashamed of the word because the gospel writers added to the words of Jesus or because Luke embellished history when he wrote Acts--if the Church is ashamed of the word it's no different than the child who is ashamed of their mother because she is old-fashioned, or not in step with the latest ideas or fashions or because she is showing her age.

The word is what's happening.

"I did nothing," said Luther when he was recounting the weakening of the papacy and the reformation of the Church--"while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip of Amsdorf [Luther's theological buddy]

the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all.”

The call of salvation is always the call to the word. And the call to discernment likewise.

The call of leadership. The church at Corinth was a divided church with *some* practices that were immoral and *some* practices that reflected the factions that the church had fallen into. Some in the church weren’t so eager to continue under Paul’s leadership. So Paul begins this letter with the phrase “Paul, *called* to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the *will of God*.” All genuine calling—holiness, salvation, leadership—reflects the voice of God, God’s saying, “I want *you*....”

All of us are leaders, by the way. Some of us are formal leaders; some informal leaders. But all of us are leaders—all of us have authority--and, as my university pastor used to say, people will use you as a model whether you want them to, or not.

The Corinthians were called to honor Paul as their apostle. But here’s where calling gets a little tricky. A frequent response to the call, “Hey you!” is... “*Me?* Are you talking to me? Or *this* person?” We want a little wiggle room. After all, what if we don’t *want* to be called? Some of the Corinthians didn’t *want* to hear about a calling to honor Paul as their apostle. They wanted a little room for politicking. A little room for modern skepticism. “Are you *sure* you’re called to be our apostle? Can you prove it? After all, we’re pretty much a ‘we’ll believe it when we see it’ kind of people.” We’ll believe when the proof is irrefutable. In terms of calling, we’ll believe it when we see it.

But the people in the Bible are different. For them, it’s not so much “I’ll believe it when I see it;” it’s more a case of, I’ll see it when I *believe* it.

We want a little room for our skepticism.

The great medieval skeptic was Erasmus of Rotterdam, Luther’s debate partner. Using Academic skeptical materials, Erasmus insisted that the issues in dispute around authority in the church could *not* be resolved and that one should therefore *suspend* judgment and remain *within* the Roman Catholic church. Luther insisted, on the other hand, that true and certain religious knowledge could and must be gained through conscience. Through inner experience.

We see this at Worms, at his church trial, when Luther refused to recant from his views. He ended his defense by saying, “If... I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons..., and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God’s word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me! Amen.”

It was the most famous speech of the Reformation. Luther standing by his own calling and his own conscience, and rejecting the wiggle room of skepticism.

Finally, calling on God. The Corinthian believers are mystically united “with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” God is not distant; God is not silent; God is not impassive; God never lets our call go to voice mail. About a third of the Psalms refer to calling on God: prayer is the heart of life

and the life of the heart. “In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears” (Ps 18:6).

Calling. The “Hey you!” from God. I hope that 2020 will be a year where we truly devote ourselves to calling: the call of holiness, the call of salvation, the call of leadership and the call of prayer. And let’s keep in mind that we are people in process. For, as Luther said, “We are not yet what we shall be, but we are *growing* toward it; the process is not yet finished.”