

Choices of Faith

Mark 1:9-15

This congregation, Crossroads Church, recently celebrated its tenth anniversary. It was a great and festive celebration of what this community of faith has been and has become – and where we're going in the next decade. Ten years ago, we were born with a dream that church can be a place that engenders life, that church can help people follow Jesus without being coercive, rule-bound, or judgmental.

Crossroads has become a place that encourages journey, questioning, and listening for the presence of the Spirit – the word of God – in each other. We are working to realize the dream of church as a community of people seeking to live in the flow of God's Spirit and also to serve others around us and those in front of us as the hands of Christ.

We have celebrated the first decade of Crossroads Church and have begun the second, seeking to be open where the journey will lead. But how will we know where the next decade will lead, which way to go, or what to do? The unfolding journey of discerning our calling as a faith community, as it is for us as individuals, is a process of learning – learning who we are and who we want to become. We discover what we are passionate about and what we were born to do.

Only by discovering, deciding, and discerning our call -- who we are and where we're going -- can we as individuals as well as a community cope with the inevitable crises of our lives. This is the way to take charge of our lives and reclaim a sense of their meaning. With this in mind, I want to turn to the gospel lesson (Mark 1: 9-15)

Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John. He had a mystical experience of God's presence in that baptism and it drove him into the wilderness of temptation. Then, with John's arrest, he began his career, his ministry. The story unfolds so quickly. Do you ever wonder if it felt like that to Jesus? Was it hard for him to know what he was supposed to do with his life?

How did Jesus decide on his message? How did he choose his vocation? The old slogan says, "You only go around once in life." If it is true that each of us has a unique contribution to bring to life and, no matter how many good things may occupy our time, "if [we] do not do this task all [our] time will have been wasted," (Jalaludin Rumi) how do we find that task? We can learn from Jesus a little bit about how did he choose his path to make the most of his life, but the question challenges us, "How will we choose to use this opportunity we have at living?" What do we each need in order to hear God's call, to respond, and to live meaningful and abundant lives? What is the call of God for your life and mine?

We can learn from Jesus' experience leading to his choosing a meaningful vocation. In growing up, he must have learned to be passionate about the tradition of his faith. He must have seen injustice toward many people – many around him living in extreme poverty. He must have seen lots of people cut off from a sense of empowerment and a

sense of hope. Also, he must have found meaning and hope in his faith tradition of Judaism, in the prophetic words about God's justice and love. That tradition must have filled him with passion for God's Shalom, God's kingdom: the vision that was so different than the world Jesus saw around him.

Jesus seems to have had a lot of the essential elements to choose his meaningful vocation. He had a mentor -- John the Baptist. We all needed someone more experienced to help show us the ropes and the way to go. Jesus received deep spiritual affirmation of his essential identity -- his mystical experience of God in the form of a dove. He was compelled to go into the wilderness -- the place of temptation, self-discovery, and preparation. And, in that wilderness, he experienced challenges and testing. Finally, the circumstances of life determined his timing as they often do for ours. Like Jesus, we respond to the events of our lives. Like him, hopefully our responses lie in keeping with our clearest sense of our own identity and what we discern God wants us to do. God calls us, invites us to live following our deepest passion.

So, what about your personal calling from God, and mine? The Bible uses the Greek word *kharis* among others for this life call. The word often means gift as in a gift of the Spirit: *charisma* or *charismatic*. In Ephesians 3:8, *kharis* is translated *grace* as in the call of God for me is a grace to do a work or to engage in a task. Your calling and mine is not so much a daunting task we have to accomplish, but a gift we have to open.

Author Francis Dewar (*Invitations*) wrote that when you're doing what you were born to do, there is a certain grace and beauty, something compelling about it -- a sense of joy. In this way, following your call feels like such a privilege for you to be doing. How many times has someone engaged in a worthwhile ministry or returned from a mission trip or other such experience with words like, "I received so much more than I gave." This is a powerful sign that you are touching a place of *call* in your life.

To be living within a sense of call is to be experiencing a profound sense of gratitude in your work. To follow call means to step out to something new and fresh -- to take a risk. Doing what we are called to do is unique to each of us. It will look different even when two people are doing the same work.

I want you to come away from this teaching knowing that God is calling you -- that you have a calling. Your call is what you were born to do and it is so important for you to discover it and create it. Call is a pathway you find and also a trail you blaze. How important is it for you to discern your call and answer it? Poet W. H. Auden wrote:

God may reduce you
on Judgment Day
to tears of shame
reciting by heart
the poems you would
have written had
your life been good

Author Francis Dewar (*Invitations*) tells us that to find and live your call will require a journey -- maybe physical, certainly spiritual. It will involve some risk. It will certainly involve some financial risk. You call will not arrive fully developed for you to step into. The seeds of call are present now in your life where you feel particularly passionate. The seeds of call lie with those people who are in need where you feel particularly attracted.

We often limit the idea of call to those with religious careers: to ministers, missionaries, etc. Nothing could be farther from the truth. How many of Jesus' parables are about religious people and situations? By and large, there are none. The parables involve people living their lives and they were all about seeing God! God is seen in the everyday walks of life -- in the lives of people. The call of religion is to help name the presence of the Spirit. It is to encourage and affirm people on their very practical journeys of work and family life, and to be awake to that Spirit presence. You and I each have something important to accomplish for the good of the world, and also to complete something vital within us (Eliz. O'Conner, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*). That is your call, your vocation.

I am one of those professional religious people who often seem to claim a monopoly on the sense of being called. Make no mistake -- I feel called to this profession of religious work, being a pastor. That sense of calling was affirmed by the community of faith that ordained me for this particular work. And the way I'm living out this vocation is different than anyone else -- any other pastor -- because it's me with all my uniqueness. But being a pastor is not really my call. It is, rather, a way of living out my call, of walking with people on the journey -- kind of a professional friend.

Pastoral ministry works for me. My particular set of skills, attitude, and passion work well in this setting, but that calling continues to grow, change, and clarify. It is taking shape through the writing I'm doing these days. That sense of calling I have is to help people come to see the beauty of Christ's message at the core of life, once you take away and set aside the layers upon layers of additions, interpretations, rules, and tragic history of the Christian Church. At the core of faith and life, there is Jesus: our example, guide, and friend in whose life we find challenge and the freedom to weave our lives around love. There is Jesus in whose face we see a mirror of truth -- the reality of God.

I want you to come away from today committed to finding your call, your unique vocation. It won't be fully developed, but is tugging at you. Let it move more and more into your conscious mind. Be aware of those in need on the margins of life in our community -- especially the ones you may feel particularly drawn to? What might they be praying for? What would it mean for you to hear their prayer? Do you have a sense of a call from God for your life? How do you feel about it: excited, anxious, skeptical? Have you written it down? What are you feeling God nudging you toward? Who would it be for? Or are you without a clue about God's call? What might be preventing you from hearing it? (questions from *Invitations* by Dewar)

Where do your passions stir? Where are you willing to take a chance? Your calling waits and this congregation wants to walk with you on your journey in Jesus' name.