

Sermon- January 26th, 2020- Who am I?

Let us pray, with your grace, we have gathered together for worship this day O God. WE thank you for your blessings in our lives and ask that you would receive our hymns and prayers in your love and care. Now O God, I offer you the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts and may they be acceptable to you our redeemer. Amen.

So often in the church, when we speak of being called by God, we automatically connect those words to the call by God to ministry. I will admit that is partly our own fault, for when we interview perspective candidates and those seeking to be ordained, commissioned and recognized, people looking to lead in the church, we focus on those words and that question. I have both answered and asked the question “how would you described you call to ministry?” more times than I care to admit. But what about everyone else? What about all of the good of wonderful people in the church that do not feel called into ministry? Are all of you not also called by God?

Two years ago, there was a study conducted by a seminary in the US that looked to determine who was most likely to use the words “called by God” when it came to their life. One hundred percent of ministers surveyed could articulate a call from God, but less than 5% of lay folks being surveyed used those words to describe themselves. Many could easily articulate a love of life and a love for what

they did with their life, they could easily articulate a deep faith and were purposely people that had offered leadership in their churches for years, but they could not, or maybe would not, use the words called by God to describe their lives in any capacity. Because of that I struggled a great deal this week finding words to formulate my reflection for you this morning, because I would guess that you might feel the same as those who participated in that study. When it comes to the words of call, or even when it comes to a passage like the one we read today from the Gospel of Matthew, my hunch would be that the vast majority of you would not consider yourself in the role of the disciples; meaning that your attendance and participation in the life of this church would not be seen as the same as answering the call from the Lord to a life of faithful leadership.

So instead of preaching a message to you about call to ministry and faithful leadership based on the almost iconic reading today from the Gospels; I want to challenge all of us to think of call differently, to place yourselves into the call of God to faithful leadership and I want to do that by focusing instead on our letter from St. Paul. St. Paul's letter also focuses on the call from God in our lives, but it does so in much more sensible way; it highlights a particularly important part of

God's call which is the call to be, rather than the more familiar and easier call to do.

That likely sounds a bit confusing so I want to take you back a few years to a time when you were asked, or maybe you asked a child this question, "What do you want to be, when you grow up?" If you were to look at my school book that my mother spent time working on each year as I grew, you would likely find that my answers to that question over the years were pretty standard, "What do you want to be, when you grow up?" I wanted to be a fireman, a fisherman, a police man or an astronaut. We likely have all been asked that question, or have asked that question, or at very least have heard that question being asked. The question looks to discover our dreams, our wishes for the lives we will live. However, at some point that question changes. Looking back, I noticed the change in High school, the question posed by our guidance counsellor was no longer, "What do you want to be?" Instead it became, "What do you want to do?"

Now I appreciate that that is a slight difference, but it is a difference and its an important difference. The question of what do you want to be (?) looks to develop ones identify; it speaks to our being, who we are, whose we are; what is

important to us, what we hold as significant, how we seek to define ourselves? What do you want to do, asks what we would like to spend time on? It asks us to clarify what tasks we are willing to undertake for a certain percentage of our days. They're isn't a requirement that one's identity must be involved. For example, one who spends their days making coffee for others, does not have their identity as a person defined by coffee. That is simply what they do, rather than who they are. Yet other times what we do, very much defines who we are. Even though that is the case, without knowing our being, its really hard to do.

I was reminded of poem this week written by Pastor the Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. You have heard me mention Bonhoeffer before. Bonhoeffer was a first and for most a Lutheran pastor in Germany in the lead up to and during World War 2. However, when the Nazi Party and Hitler himself, tired hard to corrupt the National Church for their own end and began a systematic elimination of people who were different then they were, Bonhoeffer became one of the few who stood in fierce opposition from within. Bonhoeffer not only spoke out against the evil he saw taking place within his home country, but even went as far as participating in an assassination attempt on Hitler's life. He was however eventually arrested, put on trial and put to death for his part not only in the

attempt Hitler's life, but also for what Adolf Hitler believed German people working against him to stop him from succeeding.

While in prison Bonhoeffer wrote a great deal of letters, poem and reflection which after his death were compiled into one book aptly named, Letters and papers from Prison. On March 4th, 1945, just over a month before his execution he penned a poem entitled "Who am I?" I want to share this poem with you today, because to me it speaks to the level of call that no matter who we are and what we do, that each of us must first and foremost recognize.

"Who am I?"

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer (March 4, 1945)

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
like a squire from his country-house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
freely and friendly and clearly,
as though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I would bear the days of misfortune
equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
 Or am I only what I know of myself?
 restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
 struggling for breath, as though hands were
 compressing my throat,
 yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
 thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
 trembling in expectation of great events,
 powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
 weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
 faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

Who am I? This or the other?
 Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?
 Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
 and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
 Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
 fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
 Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.

–Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Who am I?” in *Letters & Papers From Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1953/1997), 347-8.

St. Paul shares a similar sentiment in his letter to the people in Corinth. You have heard me say before that this letter, of which one of the best examples of love comes out of a passage often heard at weddings, is actually a letter penned to a family of faith in the midst of turmoil, grief and conflict. It is the classic example of any conflict really, there were some who felt that they had a clearer knowledge of what it meant to be faithful and how best to live that faith out; to do what they are called to do and as a result put others down because they were

not as faithful as us. There were some who were seeking to have power and control over the community and to have things done the way they wanted them to be done, rather than what was better for the community. There were those who actively worked against their community, believing they were doing what was best, but in reality, were more concerned that they would be seen as being a faithful person and a hard worker. Any of that sound familiar? WE have all experienced conflict like this. St. Paul decides, upon discovering these conflicts to focus his attention of God's call in the lives of all the people; but does not begin by saying that God calls them to be doers of faith, instead he challenges them to first answer the question of to whom they belong.

Effectively St. Paul ask them, who do you want to be? Very simply he reminds the people that they are all, every single one of them, called to be the children of God. He reminds them that even if they don't fully understand what that means, that God values them, honours them and importantly loves them. At its heart, within the church, when we speak of call, we speak of God's call to us all to be the children of God, to be people of the kingdom. Which means that before we decided what to do with that knowledge, like Bonhoeffer says, we are God's, loved and valued by God and called as God's children.

What St. Paul was saying to those folks, is the same thing I want to say to you all today. Everyone one of you, regardless of what it is you do, first and foremost are called by God to be people of the Kingdom. You wouldn't be here and find meaning it what we gather to do together if you did not feel that call someone in your life. Which means that you and I are all equally loved by God and valued by God. I am not loved more because I stand in the pulpit, the same as you are not loved more because you are on the farm, or work in the hospital, or are raising a family, or work in the service industry, or work with oil and gas, or work in the political spectrum, or health care, or education, or retail, or own your own business, or are retired, or and the list goes on and on.

All of us first and foremost are called to be children of God, called to be the people of the way, called to be members of the Kingdom of God. Over time we will learn what it means to and will find many ways and all kinds of things to do in response to God's call, but it's most important to remember that before God calls us to *do* anything God first calls us to *be* something: God's own beloved children. And knowing this, we can trust that the rest will follow. Being called by God is not just something that someone in my position should have a monopoly over, because all of us, all of you are equally called by God to be people of faith.

“Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine.” May we all know that to be true in our hearts and live out that promise in all we do. For we are all called by God and loved by God. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.