

*From the Pastor Jeff Schooley's Desk:
A Sermon for Sunday, January 15, 2023*

This isn't coming from a peer reviewed study or anything, but I believe that there are two types of people in the world. The first will see a call from a phone number they don't know and will ignore it. They assume that if it is someone they know that they'll leave a message and they'll get back to them. Show of hands, who is this sort of person? The other sort of person is the one who will see a call from a phone number they don't know and they'll answer it. They assume it's a sales pitch, but worry that it could be someone they know and they could need help and they borrowed a phone off a stranger and a voicemail therefore won't work and... actually, I don't know what comes after that "and" because the anxiety has already forced person number two to answer the phone. Show of hands, who is person number two? Yeah, me too. Could you tell by the very specific details?

Well, because I answer the phone almost always, I get a lot of "Hello, is Mr. Schooley there?" And I love it when they mispronounce my name because then I can, in all honesty (I am a pastor, after all, and therefore have to be honest), say, "Oh, I'm sorry. There's no one by that name here." And then, because I'm an egomaniacal beast, I'll think to myself, "But there is a *Dr. Schooley!*" When we make calls, we gotta get the name right, right? Otherwise, miscommunication abounds and the call doesn't go through.

Well, in these thirteen verses from John's gospel, we see Jesus called four different names on five separate occasions. He's the "Lamb of God" in verse 29, then the "Son of God" in verse 34, reverts back to "Lamb of God" in verse 36, then becomes "Rabbi," which means "teacher," in verse 38, ultimately ending on "Messiah," a.k.a. "Christ" or "Anointed," in verse 41. And while any theological discussion about "calling" is going to focus primarily on Jesus as the one doing the calling and not what He is called, I want to contend that if we are called by Jesus, then settling on an identity for Him will also mean settling on an identity for ourselves. Simply put, the called receive their identity from the caller. (Which, again, is why I can never respond to "Mr. Schooley." I don't want that new identity).

But before we get too deep into this topic, let's admit some pre-existent ambivalence around this whole notion of calling to begin with. I'll start: When I was in college, the campus ministry I participated in was very big in challenging its students to consider what their "vocation" was. "Vocation" is a fancy way of talking about "calling." And even though we worshipped a Middle Eastern Jew from 2,000 years ago, everyone's "vocation" always seemed to line up naturally with an academic major being offered in twenty-first century America. What a coincidence! Because I was an English major, though, I always chaffed at these "vocation" conversations. They felt like the pious version of my mother's repeated question, "...and what are you going to do with an English degree again?" This campus ministry experience was my first taste of the self-righteousness that too often attends to conversations about "vocation" or "calling."

I was relieved, therefore, during our Monday Zoom conversation about today's scriptures when one brave participant noted their own problem with this whole topic. And no sooner had they cracked that door a bit, then the flood gates ripped open. A near-consensus quickly formed that "calling" had negative connotations, was relationally uncomfortable, made some feel inferior while allowing others to present with a superiority complex. One participant even mimicked a hypothetical conversation that when something like this:

[*overly pious*] "I've been called by God."

[*dryly/sarcastically*] "Wow. How nice for you."

Of course, there are levels of irony to everything I just said because while I was in college, I bristled at this "vocation" or "calling" conversation, but now I'll never interview for another job that doesn't begin with some version of this prompt: "Tell us how you were called into ministry." And I know I had better have a good answer because PNCs are looking for something more than, "Well, I sat down one day and said to myself, I said, 'Jeff, you can either go sell iPhones at Verizon or you could become a pastor.' And here I am. This just, I don't know, seemed like a better deal... better benefits." I don't think I'd be standing

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here today if that's what I had shared with the PNC that called me. Pastors have to be able to name and explain their calling. And even in churches where there is a near-consensus of discomfort with this topic, even they still expect pastors to be able to do this naming and describing work. Like I said... irony.

So, let's clear the slate of all our previous perceptions of calling. Let's pretend like we're tabula rasa when it comes to this topic. Because when we do so, I believe that two things will happen. First, we will feel positively toward the notion of being called. Second, we'll grow in our capacity to humbly, honestly name and describe our own sense of calling.

First point of consideration about callings: They are communal, not individual. Okay, if you quickly scan scripture, you'll find a few individual call narratives – especially with the prophets in the Old Testament – but the overwhelming witness is that calling is a communal gift. Paul, for instance, addresses the church in Corinth as “called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” To be sure, later in this letter, Paul will detail – with great poetics and beauty – the unique and individual *giftings* we each receive in our baptisms via the Holy Spirit. You can read chapter 12 for more on that. But our calling is communal. It addresses us collectively, not individually.

Second, we are called to an identity – in this case “saints” – and that identity will spin out into action. We are not first called to particular disciplines or practices, but rather into an identity. In philosophical terms, calling begins in the ontological – the stuff of being, not the ethical – the stuff of doing. I think the clearest example of this is how Simon, son of John, gets renamed “Cephas” by Jesus. A name is an identity. Of course, the ethical actions of this name are hiding right beneath the surface as “Cephas” is taken from the Aramaic “Kephas,” which means “rock.” Later Jesus will tell Peter that Peter is the “Kephas” – the rock – on which Jesus will build His Church.

It strikes me as significant that Simon Peter gets renamed *after* Jesus is regarded as “Messiah,” and not merely “Rabbi.” That is, in the chronology

of events that we read, Andrew (Peter's brother) is one of those who first addresses Jesus as “Rabbi,” but when he goes to fetch his brother, he says, “We have found the Messiah.” Peter, then, is the first to get this new identity in his calling because he comes before Jesus in Jesus' truest identity – the Messiah – and not merely as a Rabbi. “Rabbi” is not, of course, a bad title. It carries with it a great deal of respect and those first disciples were not wrong to show such respect, but Jesus is more than a mere teacher. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God.

Third, and last introductory point, any discussion about calling in the Christian church is inherently indebted to calling in the Old Testament, maybe most especially the calling of Abraham, which forms the people of God named Israel. I'm currently reading a book for this book club with other pastors in our Presbytery. It's by Scott Hagley, the resident missiologist at my alma mater, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In this book, titled *Eat What Is Set Before You*, Dr. Hagley writes about Israel – and I'm going to quote at length here:

“The voice and presence of God disrupted and interrupted them. And they responded in faith, by leaving what was once settled and comfortable. They received the promise and they participated in the call. Their desires began to be shaped according to the promise and they began to imagine their lives as participating in the story of God. This is faith; this is why faith must always be accompanied by disruption and interruption. Such themes are expressed in stories of the faithful again and again. But the disruption comes, not only from God's call, but also by the earthly, creaturely conditions of the called. The call does not elevate one above creaturely existence, but rather, orders one within it.”

There's a lot of good stuff in that little paragraph, but two things strike me as most important. First, calling shapes their desires. We tend to think that our desires are just our emotions and our emotions come from... well, we don't really know, but they're there. Most emotions, however, are constructed in, by, and for community. We learn what to desire by the world in which we live. And if that last sentence made your blood run

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cold, I don't blame you, for we live in a culture that malforms our every desire to participate in the endless rat race of production and consumption. We are fed a thousand different ways to play and find pleasure, but even though there are so many different forms of play and pleasure, every one of them first runs through the mandate to work, to earn that play, to gain that pleasure. This is the metanarrative of our world.

Our only hope in such a system is that we are lifted up out of this rat race and placed within a new narrative, a new story that God is telling. And being so placed there – having our status quo disrupted and interrupted – we can participate in God's calling and have our desires shaped anew.

Second, this sense of calling, as Dr. Hagley describes it, avoids the pitfalls of self-righteous piety – like I experienced in my campus ministry days – because this sense of calling does not elevate us above our creaturely existence, but rather, orders our life within such existence. Calling, then, is about helping us set new priorities based upon the story God is creating in God's creation. St. Augustine helps me understand what Dr. Hagley is going for here, as St. Augustine regards sin not as a failure to love – Augustine believes that all humans can do is love because humans are created in God's image and God is love – rather, sin is understood as *disordered* loves. It is, using a hyperbolic example, okay to loooooove ice cream. But if your love of ice cream causes you to push an old lady off the sidewalk and into traffic as you chase down the ice cream truck, then you have a disordered love. Your love of your neighbor is supposed to trump your love of ice cream.

I think I most appreciate this aspect of what it means to be called. It means that my life has been blessed with a set of priorities that help me order how I live in this world. And this may be especially important for American Christians because America is known for its freedom. America is the “land of the free” and in America “you can be anything you want to be.” And that all may be true, but if so, it is a curse. For who knows what to do with all that freedom? Who knows how to make anything more than temporary commitments with all that freedom? How does one discern between what is meaningful

and what is arbitrary with all that freedom? One of the greatest disservices we do to our children is to tell them that they can be whatever they want to be. It is a far better thing to say to them, “You can choose whatever *job* you want to do, just so long as it somehow loves God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loves your neighbor as yourself. And that's because you have been marked and sealed as Christ's own in your baptism, which has placed this calling of love on your life.” That's a good statement for any child – whether they are eight or eighty or anywhere in between – for that is a way of helping each of these children of God order their lives within the work and promises of God.

Friends, you have been called by the Messiah. And by that I mean that God interrupts and disrupts the status quo of life by teaching you to love what God loves and to love *how* God loves. Furthermore, it humbly keeps your life grounded in your creaturely existence – being called doesn't make you holier than thou – but now you live in your existence with a set of holy priorities that help you order your life around this God who is love.

Ope! What is that? I can hear your phone ringing. You've been called. Don't be afraid to answer.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.