

"Called to Serve Gladly"

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – Lectionary 5
8:30 and 10:45 a.m. Sunday, February 5, 2012
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Isaiah 40:21-31; I Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

My father was a dentist. I'm sure there were times when he did not enjoy his job. Some aspects of being a dentist were frustrating or tedious. It annoyed my dad when patients arrived much later than their scheduled appointment, since it made the entire set of appointments that day run late. There was all that paperwork involving health insurance—and this, at a time when, compared to our day and age, the paperwork was relatively simple. Self-employment had its own set of headaches: Renting office space, paying utilities, no sick days available, and a week's vacation meant a week without pay. You might suppose that being a dentist was lucrative for my father, but it was not. And by that last decade of dentistry, his hips and shoulders and hands found that the job had taken its toll on them. Aches and pains remained long after the workday was over.

But do I believe my dad had a calling to this vocation? Yes, I do. He might not have enjoyed every part of the job, but there were certain things that provided a satisfaction having nothing to do with his income or leisure. To help someone have a beautiful smile who for the longest time was embarrassed by their teeth, was a joy for my father. Even more so, to help someone have a beautiful smile who for the longest time was deathly afraid of **going to** the dentist—now that was a real joy for him. My dad was gentle, explained everything before he did anything, and made certain his patients trusted him. That was a gift. That was his calling.

One of my favorite quotes from writer and pastor Frederick Buechner is this about our calling: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*)

I don't know that my dad would have articulated why he was a dentist in the same manner as Buechner did, but I think it was like that. A deep gladness settled into my father as he met a deep hunger in the world.

I suspect that's what was happening with Paul as he describes in his letter to the church at Corinth why he does what he does. Paul feels pressed upon, obligated to preach the gospel, share the story of Jesus Christ with all people, wherever he went. Obligated and duty-bound, but not as a burden. Rather, it seems to be Paul's passion to share his faith. So much so that Paul, who admits having every right to be compensated for his efforts, is willing to let go of that due compensation. It's not the important thing for him. Proclaiming good news of love and forgiveness and life to those who need to hear it is the important thing. That's reward enough for Paul.

My mom told me once that my dad kept his dental fees artificially low for several years, when our local paper mill had a wage freeze imposed on its employees. My dad just wanted to provide dental care to his patients in the community. The money wasn't the important thing. Hence why his dental practice wasn't all that lucrative. But it remained his calling.

A calling comes in many shapes and sizes. It's not necessarily your day job, but it may be a gift or skill you have. You say you don't know what your calling is? Maybe you should take Buechner's words and think about your own life—what is your deep gladness, and where does it connect with the world's deep hunger? Where do your abilities or energies meet up with the world's needs, so that you, a child of God, can make a difference in God's creation?

We're celebrating Boy Scout Sunday today, and Trinity's strong long-standing relationship with Boy Scout Troop 51 and Cub Scout Pack 51. One of the things I treasure about scouting is the opportunities offered to young men (and young women in Girl Scouts) to learn and grow, try new things, develop new skills, nurture a gift, devote time and energy to a passion.

Did you know there are approximately 100 different merit badges a Boy Scout can earn? One of them is Dentistry—who'd have thought? There's even one for Nuclear Science ("Do not attempt to extract uranium at home..."). Certainly some of these badges might lead a young man to consider his career path. But other badges—Life-Saving, Public Speaking, Soil and Water Conservation—are also opportunities which allow a person to take something or some idea they are simply passionate about, and discover more. The skills to save a life in a crisis...the ability to speak articulately and persuasively in front of a group of people...the stewardship of our world's resources. Somewhere in all that is where your deep gladness can be found and the world's deep hunger is waiting.

Speaking of hunger...our Gospel lesson today describes what happens when Jesus met Simon Peter's mother-in-law, who had been sick in bed with a fever. Mark writes that Jesus took her hand, lifted her up out of bed, and healed her. Then, she started serving everyone in her home. Apparently, she zipped into the kitchen and prepared a meal for her hungry guests. Good grief, we might think. Let the poor lady have a day off! She just got over being sick! Instead, **they** should be serving **her**. But what I believe happened here was that Jesus met her deep hunger—which was to be restored to health and thus restored to her home, family and community. Jesus met her deep hunger, and he was deeply glad to do so. And having been restored by Jesus, this woman now got up gladly to cook, serve, nourish, offer hospitality—this was her passion, her gift, her calling. Jesus gave her opportunity to do that once more.

Fairly frequently, I am asked how I write a sermon, how I go about this task of proclamation every week. I don't always know how to answer that question. Oh, I can talk about PROCESS—how I study the appointed scripture, read biblical commentaries, do research into word translations. I can talk about how I sit in front of my computer with a big cup o' joe and type and delete and type and take a walk to clear my head and read aloud and argue with God a little and edit and type some more. I can tell you what it **isn't**: I don't sit back in my chair in front of the computer and have the invisible hand of the Holy Spirit moving the mouse on the pad, or tapping on the keyboard for me while I sip my coffee. **Nor** do I prepare a 10-page outline with my point-by-point discussion of

the scripture text and detail my personal opinion on the subject. Preaching is different from both of those things, and I don't know how to describe what happens. All I know is I'm deeply glad (most of the time) in the writing and preaching, and my hope is that a deep hunger here will be met in my preaching. In this process, I learn and grow. I find myself guided and strengthened. No, I don't enjoy some aspects of writing sermons and preaching—it's a lot of work, it's often a struggle, it can be tedious (maybe on your end as well!). And once Sunday evening hits, I face my own anxiety and terror that I have to do it all over again for next Sunday! But is this my passion, my gift, my calling? I think so. With humility before God and you, I think so.

Warning: Others may be surprised at what you consider your calling. They may think it's a waste of time, or makes no difference in the big scheme of things and a broken world. They may even profoundly disagree with what you do. To go where God calls you requires courage and the ability to deal with criticism. And it most definitely requires prayer. Did you note what Jesus did early the next morning, after an entire night of healing the hurting people who came to the door of Simon's home? Jesus went out by himself to pray. Here is another example where the presence of God the Father in his life was absolutely essential for him. Their conversation through prayer gave Jesus the guidance he needed to obey God's call, to follow his passion, to share the kingdom of God in more places than just at Simon's front door. From town to town Jesus travelled, his deep gladness meeting deep hunger in every corner. And beyond today's lesson, Mark will go on in his Gospel to show us how Jesus' call would elicit criticism, require courage, and eventually lead to our Lord's betrayal, arrest, execution....and resurrection.

Each one of us has both a deep hunger and a deep gladness in deep inside ourselves. Daily, each of us needs that hunger to be met. We need to be restored, to be healed, forgiven, strengthened. Jesus will be there for us through it all. That's what he came to do. Jesus fills that deep hunger in each of us, and then calls us out to meet the deep hunger of others, and do so gladly.

AMEN.

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