

“FOUR STORIES: II – THE CALLS OF MOSES & THE RICH YOUNG RULER”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Exodus 3:1-15

Luke 18:18-25

I’ve been doing a lot of pondering lately. I suspect that anyone approaching retirement does a lot of pondering. I’ve thought a lot about the 35 years I’ve been in pastoral ministry – the places, the people, the experiences, the ups and the downs. Looking back, it’s gone by in a flash, in the blink of an eye.

There have been so many high, holy moments along the way, but today, I’m thinking of one moment in particular – a moment that changed my life. It happened in a place called Drayton Manor, a beautiful, beautiful retreat center that used to be owned by our annual conference. It was an old colonial manor house with beautiful sloping green lawns that stretched way down to the water’s edge, and it was there, sitting on one of those lawns at the top of a hill, that the moment happened.

I was on a retreat with the Administrative Council of my home church, Asbury United Methodist Church in New Castle, Delaware. At that time, I was

employed full-time as a secretary at the University of Delaware, but in my “spare” time I helped lead the youth group at Asbury, led the handbell choir, served on the Commission on Education and the Administrative Council, helped lead worship and so on.

So we’re at this retreat at Drayton Manor, and we’re taking a break and the Senior Pastor, Ron Bergman, and I went for a walk, eventually stopping and sitting down on that grassy hill to gaze out over the beautiful water. And then it happened. Ron turned to me, and out of the blue (at least for me) he asked, “Karen, do you think that God might be calling you to ordained ministry?” At that moment, I had no idea that his question would change my life.

I am certain that the same could be said for a man named Moses. One day, one ordinary day when he was just going about his business, something happened that changed his life. He saw a burning bush, a bush that was burning, but oddly, was not being consumed by the fire. It caught his attention but good!

And then he heard a voice, God’s voice! God told him that he needed him, for God’s people were in trouble and needed someone to lead them out of Egypt, and

God had chosen him. Clearly, Moses felt unworthy, because his first reply was just that – “Who am I that I should go?” God tried to reassure him, “Don’t worry, I’ll be with you.”

But it wasn’t enough, for Moses came back at God. “But what if the people question me? What if they ask me who sent me?” Again, God patiently answered Moses’ questions.

A third time, Moses comes back at God. “But Lord, suppose the people don’t believe me, suppose they don’t think that you really appeared to me.” This time God did a little show and tell – changing Moses’ staff into a snake and then changing it back again. I guess Moses was still a little skeptical, because God went to plan b, and told Moses to put his hand in his cloak, and when he drew it out it was filled with leprosy, but then when he put it back God cured him and his hand came out the second time white as snow.

You would think that would have convinced Moses. But no, he tried a fourth time to talk God out of it. “But Lord, I’m not good at public speaking. Surely

someone else would do this better.” Again, God reassured Moses he would be with him, but still, Moses dragged his feet. “Oh Lord, please Lord, send somebody else.”

The scripture says that God’s anger was kindled at that point, and he reminded Moses that his brother Aaron was a good speaker, and he could do the speaking for him.

Then finally, finally, Moses came around and answered the call, and you know the rest of the story – he led God’s people out of Egypt, and is counted a great hero in the story of our faith family.

I suspect that, more often than not, when God calls someone to a new vocation, he hears all sorts of excuses. That certainly was the case with me. It’s not that I was inclined immediately to say no, it’s that, like Moses, I didn’t feel worthy. There were so many strikes against me, that I was sure God had it wrong.

First of all, I was uncomfortable speaking in front of people. You know, when I went to college at Salisbury, I was initially planning on being a history teacher.

But the longer I went, the more petrified I became of standing up in front of a class speaking. So I changed my major to just history.

How could God be calling someone to be a pastor who was afraid to speak in front of people?

There were other things as well – I didn't like going to funerals. At that point in my life, which was my late 20's, I had only been to a handful of funerals – now, God was asking me to take on a vocation which included not only going to funerals, but officiating them?

I wasn't particularly fond of hospitals, was I? But answering the call meant being in hospitals with people, and sometimes being with them when they were dying. I didn't know if I could do it.

The list went on and on, but the bottom line is that I didn't feel worthy. But God was patient with me, as he was with Moses, and as he told Moses, so he told me, "I will be with you all the way," and so he has.

Now, you may not feel like this story – this story of being called by God – has anything to do with you. I respectfully disagree. Because while not everyone receives a vocational call to ministry, I believe that God does call everyone to do something, which is why I chose the Gospel lesson I did for this service.

This call, in the life of the rich young ruler, comes in a different way, it comes from the man himself. He comes to Jesus. Jesus didn't come to him. He comes to Jesus, because he knows something's missing in his life, but he's not quite sure what it is. He's been the perfect person of faith, he's memorized scripture and laws, he follows the rules, he's done everything right, yet something's still missing.

Jesus knows it too, and when he tells him what it is, that he is burdened by his possessions, and that if he lets that go, he will find what he's looking for – it's too much, and sadly, he walks away.

If he could have just trusted Jesus, he would have experienced abundant life, instead of the sadness wrought by always having to be in control.

One pastor put it well when she wrote this: “For all the truth that I am not capable of being and doing what it would take to make my own way into heaven, the promise is that it’s already been done. And so maybe, just maybe, the gift and promise of the story of the rich young ruler is that you and I get a taste of the eternal life Jesus offers us even now, even in small ways, as we make choices which mean giving away part of ourselves for the sake of something more, as we seek to follow him.” (On-line, Janet Hunt, “Choices,” *Dancing with the Word*, 10/2012)

Even if you’re not being called to a vocation, per se, all of us, as children of God and followers of Christ, are called to give away part of ourselves for the sake of others, for the sake of something more. The question is how we do that, and the problem is, frankly, that too often, we’re afraid to do something, try something new, reach out and take risks, or go out of our comfort zone.

We read stores of spiritual super-heroes like Moses, and know that we’re nothing like him. Well, the good news is that we don’t have to be, and the even better news, is that, when God called him, he wasn’t a spiritual super hero either! Nor were the disciples. All of them were ordinary people doing ordinary things, just like you and me, until God called them to something more, and they answered “yes.”

You know, I know all this talk of “answering a call from God” makes people nervous. You’re not sure what it means. You’re not sure you’re up to doing something new. If you’re honest, you’re kind of comfortable doing what you’re doing and being what you’re being right now.

The truth is – we make answering God’s call on our lives more stressful than it needs to be. Listen, you can answer God’s call to action in big and small ways. You don’t have to change the world, you don’t have to give up your career and go into the ministry, you just need to listen to the nudging of the Holy Spirit when he calls. Let me show you what I mean by means of a video clip someone forwarded to me this week.

SHOULDER TAPS (You Tube – Coach Bill Hart)

You see? That man showed so perfectly how God works – sometimes in shoulder taps. Someone he taps you on the shoulder and tells you to do something – maybe big, maybe small. Look what happened when that man said “yes” to God’s bidding – he touched that woman in such a special way, and bonus! He was touched as well!

Dear friends, our God is a calling God. He calls us because he has gifted us in unique ways and wants us to use those gifts; he calls us because others need to know him and we're the ones that will show Him to them; and he calls us because he knows that, in answering his call, our lives will be richer, fuller, and closer to him.

So friends, whether one day you see a burning bush, or hear an invitation from a friend sitting with you on a grassy hill, or feel a light tap on your shoulder calling you to speak to someone, I pray that you will not immediately think "I can't do this," but rather, you will trust that the God who is calling you will give you what you need to do what he asks, and will be with you through it all.

May it be so.

Amen.