

The calling of Jesus' first four disciples raises the question of who else Jesus calls. To begin with, after calling the first four disciples, Jesus called eight more to add up to twelve. But there were many others. According to Luke, Jesus sent out seventy-two disciples on a mission. Several women also are mentioned as ministering to Jesus. And then Jesus asked that the children also should come to him and not be hindered. It begins to look like a lot of people are called by Jesus with the growing suspicion that Jesus calls everybody.

The sense of a call from God is quite meaningful to me. While I was at Nashotah House Seminary in Wisconsin, I felt called to be a Benedictine monk. This calling was quite palpable and it became unthinkable that I would do anything else but seek admission to St. Gregory's Abbey after I graduated. Before I could respond to this call, though, I had to answer a more fundamental call; namely the called to be a Christian. Long story short: although I was raised in the Episcopal Church and formed by the liturgy while singing in a boys choir, I had fallen away for several years. By hindsight, I can see God drawing me back during all that time even when I was fighting the hardest to resist God.

Many people also feel a calling to holy orders: priesthood or the diaconate, as I did myself several years after having joined the monastery. Although the church is working hard to expand this sense of calling, there is still a tendency to think of certain ministries as callings but everything else is a job or volunteer work. But these are callings just as much as callings to holy orders or the monastic life. When we go back to the earlier call to be a Christian, we get a sense of God's call to everybody, not just a few special people, (or better said: everybody is special in some way!). Everybody is called to baptism and from this calling, we each receive a call to one thing or another. Actually, this preliminary call goes back even further. Each of us is called out of nothingness into being by the God who created all of us.

There are many implications to the fact that we are called. The most fundamental is that we are relational beings. As we become aware of the richness and depth inside each of us, it is easy to become intoxicated with a sense of self that tries to build a little isolated world. But the notion that this inner world is autonomous in an individualistic sense is sheer illusion. Being called into being and then called to be in a particular way is based on a relationship with God. But note that Jesus did not call an individual here or there; God called several people into a community. We are all baptized in the Body of Christ, the Church. Indeed, we are not only called by God, we are called by many other people who also have a strong effect on us. The richness experienced within is in fact derived from other people calling on us from before we were born. With each particular calling, there is not only the inner sense of being called by God but the external call from other people. In my case, many people confirmed a potential call to the monastic life during my time in seminary, not least the dean and my diocesan bishop. And then there was the need for discernment with the abbot and chapter of St. Gregory's. Likewise, when a person experiences a call to holy orders, there is a communal discernment process in place. From the standpoint of people helping with such a discernment, the question is: Do I want to call this person to minister to me? This question that makes it clear that a calling isn't about me, it is about us as a community.

The particular calling that each of us has lies in the communal calling of the Church. In our Gospel reading, we have the rudiments of the communal calling through Jesus' ministry of repenting and "proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people." (Mt. 4:23) What is the Good News? Jesus' movement into the territory of Zebulim and Naphtali is quite significant and not just an obscure geographical detail. This had been Gentile territory since the Assyrian invasion of Israel and was land occupied by the Romans in Jesus' time. The history of military violence is the darkness in which Isaiah is prophesying that a "great light" was coming. Jesus was preaching the deliverance from violence based on forgiveness. Forgiveness is the deep healing offered by Jesus as he healed the people who came to him. In various ways, proclaiming the Good News of forgiveness is what each of us is called to through our calling in creation and baptism. The way each of us carries out this fundamental mandate will differ and it is because healing and proclaiming the Good News needs to be done in many different ways that there are so many vocations in which we serve each other, even if in seemingly small ways.

A calling is not a once-in-a-lifetime done deal. Each calling has to be renewed year by year, day by day, hour by hour. The situation in Corinth that exasperated Paul is the result of failure to renew our communal calling. The disciples, too, fought over who among them was the greatest. Some of the healings by Jesus were exorcisms, the casting out of demons. This belief in possession may seem mythological to some people today, but we can easily become possessed by other people with whom we are in conflict who then draw us away from the call of Jesus to forgiveness and reconciliation. (Note how we say this or that person gets under our skin.) This is where repentance comes in. Every time we are drawn into conflict, we need to hear anew the call of Jesus to repent and proclaim the Good News of forgiveness and healing.