

Pastor Letter: A Calling to Pastoral Ministry (1/15/23)

Until we experience a true individual calling, it can be a mysterious and mystical concept to actually discern what God is asking of us and how God is directing our path. I trust sharing my journey of becoming an ordained minister of word and sacrament can be beneficial and shed some light into your own discernment adventures.

In 1997 four clergy and three laypersons took a 16-day trip to the Holy Lands and a seed was planted in my mind and heart. Not long after that a huge fire at the Pennzoil Refinery changed the operation of that facility and we spent a frantic year attempting to turn the oil refinery into a wax plant. We encountered many unknowns in this process because we were in completely new and uncharted territory. We soon realized the facility was purchased by an outside firm and they were permanently closing our doors.

During a session meeting at my home Church, a brochure from the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary was passed around the ruling elders surrounding the table. I was the last person in the circle and the brochure found it's way into my file of session records. The seed that was planted in the Holy Lands was beginning to take root. Was I hearing a call to attend seminary? Where was God directing my journey of faith.

As certain doors were opened to me and other doors were slammed in my face, the feelings of an actual calling were growing ever stronger. Finally in desperation, I put out a fleece before God much like Gideon, when he was searching for spiritual answers. As a way of discernment, I asked God if he wanted me to attend seminary, someone would approach me tomorrow with some sort of sign. I went about my business the entire next day and attended a meeting late into the evening hours without any message from above. When I arrive at home and sat down in my easy chair feeling confused, my wife handed me a greeting card from the deacons at our Church. The card read something to the affect, "What you are considering, you can accomplish anything through Jesus Christ who strengthens us." Even though the deadline for enrolling at seminary had ended two months previously, I obediently sent my application into PTS.

Miraculously, I was accepted and in a few short weeks, I found myself in seminary along with a unique group of freshmen who were wondering what on earth we were doing at that place of theological learning. Our first year at PTS, we muddled our way through the darkness of doubt, confusing classes, lists of books to read, and endless papers to write. The second year we were not only struggling with the education duress but also working long hours in various churches in the community. The third year we found ourselves becoming young ministers looking for our first full-time calling. During our theological education we also learned how to better discern how to hear God.

During my years of working as an analytical chemist, I had developed a perfectionist attitude that enable me to find not just any testing result but discover "the" perfect result. During my seminary education, I hired a spiritual director to help me better discern where God was leading me. After ten minutes of discussion at our first meeting, my spiritual director informed me that I had a perfectionist's mindset and if I wanted to become an obedient minister, I had to lose the perfectionist attitude and embrace a more spiritual mentality. This spiritual director greatly helped me to discern my first called pastoral position and to spiritually discern that still quiet voice of God.

During my years as a called pastor, I have used the same spiritual process to discern when to leave a called position as well as when and where to accept another

called position. This spiritual process is very helpful in discerning God's will in making other required decisions during my journey of faith and in my everyday life.

This week our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah comes from the prophet's second servant song. The prophet / servant is speaking to the nations as he describes his divine calling to serve the Lord. Much like the prophet Jeremiah's calling to service, this servant's calling was issued before his birth, "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb, he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away," (Isa. 49:1-2). Notice the servant is speaking to other nations not just to Israel or Judah.

When the servant complains that he has struggled in vain to accomplish what God sent him to do in verse 4, the Lord reissues the servant's commission to bring salvation to the fallen world, "he (the Lord) says, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth,'" (v. 6).

When the Lord calls us to perform a certain task for the Kingdom of God, we may never know what fruit our meager human efforts can accomplish for God's divine purposes. We may never see the full results of our obedient service to the Kingdom.

We read about the apostle Paul's calling to serve the Lord in the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthian Church, "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes," (1 Cor. 1:1). Paul also addresses this epistle to those individual Christians who were called to be a part of this community of faith in Corinth, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours," (v. 2).

Paul is encouraging his readers to remain faithful in their calling to serve the church because the Lord will be faithful to them, "He (God) will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord," (vv. 8-9).

One afternoon a group of us from the Ethiopian Education Endowment Fund was interviewing a potential missionary candidate for a teaching position at a secondary school in Dembi Dollo, Ethiopia. We asked the candidate how she knew that she was called to this teaching position. As a pastor's wife, she was very familiar with the calling process and used the same process that her husband had used in his own callings. She told us that once the seed of serving was planted in her spirit, she merely stepped through the open doors, when they arose. When the doors closed, she patiently waited until the next one opened for her. The seed that was planted in her spirit brought forth fruit in the form of a teaching position at a secondary school and a teaching position for her husband at a nearby Bible college in Dembi Dollo, Ethiopia.

I hope and pray that this letter helps you learn to discern that still quiet voice of God, to answer the Lord's calling to a solid Christian fellowship, and to respond obediently when Jesus the Christ tells you to pick up your cross and follow him. Step through those open doors when you are given the opportunity to spread the gospel message.

Pastor Larry