

## Called by Name

Text: St. John 1:43-51

In the mid-seventeenth century the great French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal underwent an extremely intense conversion experience. Although he never communicated what exactly had happened on that “night of fire” as he called it, he did immediately afterwards write down in cryptic words the content of that experience on a small piece of paper and then sewed it into the lining of his coat where he carried it for the rest of his life. It was finally discovered after his death. A phrase from that paper has remained in our cultural and religious vocabulary ever since it was discovered, namely, the phrase: “...the living god, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, not the god of the philosophers.”

What great truth Pascal discovered that night he was converted and that he put down so succinctly is a crucial truth about Christianity. Amenable as Christianity might be to philosophical thought, and it is, still it is something different than a philosophical system. Where it is different is that it is intensely personal in a way that philosophy is not. God is a living and personal God, and not just an idea, and certainly not an abstraction. But what does it mean to say that God is personal? A good part of what it means to say that can be seen in our texts for today. In God’s seeking Samuel out in the middle of the night and in Jesus picking out the disciples, Samuel does not become a prophet nor Nathaniel a disciple because they think it is a good idea, or because they have simply reasoned themselves into these jobs. Rather, Samuel becomes a prophet and Nathaniel becomes a disciple because they are *called* to be such; they are called individually, personally, and by name. And so it is with every great figure of both testaments: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph, Moses and all the prophets; all the disciples and the apostle Paul.

That is the way it has always been within our religion and that is the way it is today. To be a minister, for example, one needs to have a call. But it is not only ministers. Becoming a deacon or an elder is also a matter of responding to a personal call, and, for that matter so is any task done in Christ's name by any of his sisters and brothers a matter of a call. It is a matter of being addressed by God and responding to that address, and even though this calling is rarely so clear and direct as God's calling Samuel's name in the night, it is no less personal and no less insistent.

But that is where there is a problem. How does one discern a call? If it isn't clear and direct, how do we know that we are called? And what, in that case, do we think we are called to do?

For a number of years I sat on the candidates' committee of my Presbytery. Now, one of the chief tasks of such committees is to determine whether any potential candidate has a call to the ministry of word and sacrament, and to help the would-be candidate discern just what his or her call is. The most obvious way to start that process of discernment is simply to ask why the person thinks he or she has a call. My experience is that most people answer chiefly by trotting out their abilities ( they usually call them gifts ) such as liking to work with people, leadership abilities, perhaps public speaking abilities, and other such things. In short, they approach the question as if they were applying for a job; they take a look at the seeming job requirements, try to prove that they fit them and then express their sincere interest in the job. None of those things, individually or even together, however, constitutes a call. Although we want well qualified people for ministry, ministry is not just a job, it is a call, which means at least that the candidate has to be claimed by the job, and be willing to be shaped by it, rather than the other way around. This is crucial. The problem then with answering in terms of gifts and talents is that too many in

the early stages of candidacy by treating the question as if it were part of a job interview are in effect saying that God and God's church really need these people and their gifts, and aren't we really lucky to have them so willing to donate them.

Well, perhaps we are, and certainly the church needs talented and generous people. But a call is not a matter of people generously donating their talents nor is a call how God deals with the technical issues of staffing churches, as if it were the instrument of some divine Human Resources department. A call is a claim on the person called. It is a calling us by name. Certainly, it is a call to do something that needs to be done, a task that ought to be done by us, clergy or laity; but it is also a call *for* us, clergy or laity. For calls claim us, and when we respond, they are the means by which God transforms us, remakes us in his image, and bring us into his life. With respect to a call, we cannot just do the job, receive our thanks, and then go about our own lives with whatever time is left over, for the job that really needs to be done is nothing less than remaking us, and finding out who we are and whose we are.

François Poulenc's opera *The Dialogue of the Carmelites*, which is taken from a play by Georges Bernanos, tells a story set in France during the time of the French Revolution. It chiefly concerns a young noblewoman by the name of Blanche. Blanche is pious and she is genuinely faithful; she earnestly wants to serve God and deepen her faith. But she is also a person who genuinely lacks courage. It is as much because of her deep personal fear of the violence that has beset France, and that threatens her family and her, as it is her love for God that she seeks to enter a convent. At her entrance interview, the Mother Superior, a wise and discerning woman, senses this immediately. Although she accepts Blanche into the convent, she also tells her point blank what it means to live a life dedicated to God, for she tells her simply, "God does not test our strengths but our weaknesses." It is precisely her courage that God tests in the coming

months. Blanche does not test well; when the revolutionaries drag the nuns away, Blanche runs away. But in the end, she is willing to go to the guillotine with the rest of the sisters, and when she is denied that martyrdom she finally willing to face life on her own for the first time in her life. For her, it must surely have seemed that because of her lack of courage that God had called her to life in a convent where it would never be tested. As it turned out, God had called her there because she did lack courage – but called her there so that she could gain it.

The problem of discerning a call is often therefore a problem of believing that we know who are, and that the talents we think we possess have something to do with that, of trying to fit our talents to the job. But when God calls us, he often does not do so by calling the name that *we* think we go by; he calls us by the name that he knows us by. God may have called Abram the son of Terah, but in responding to that call Abram became Abraham, and Sarai became Sarah; God called Saul the persecutor of the church, but in responding to that call, Saul became Paul. When God calls us, he does not call us and leave us as we are, but as we will be. Responding to that call, responding to God, is a matter then of learning who we really are, of learning what our real strengths and weaknesses are, of learning whose children we really are.

Now, I have often found that good Presbyterians balk when they are told that responding to a call such as ordained ministry is a matter of their own transformation, and that they need to look after that carefully. Good Presbyterians know that you are supposed to think about others first, to worry about the welfare of others and not your own. We are put off mightily by those who worry too much about the state of their own souls, and little about others. We assume a call is a call to do good to others, and to be selfless about it. The less we talk about ourselves the better. That is part of the reason I suspect that young men and women respond as they do when they are asked why they think they have a call, for they often sincerely think they have to prove

that they care about the good of others first and that it would be wrong to talk too much about their own development. To a degree they are right; a call is to do good for the world and to render service to God. In a culture of personal trainers and self improvement and assertiveness training, it is refreshing to hear from somebody who is not first calculating personal gain. But what such candidates do not always discern at first is that being selfless for the sake of others *is* the way by which God remakes us. And that conversely means that unless one is willing to be remade completely, they will never really do a selfless act, and will not do genuine good to others. God will not work through them if they do not let God in. For after all in the end any truly good act is God's, and all we can do is to make room to let God act. So unless one comes to learn him or herself fully and wholly as God's, unless one learns the name by which God calls them, she will not learn others, either. Unless one sees himself as God's work, he will not do God's work.

The well know Christian ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University, once told a story about himself that illustrates how intimately linked are the notions of understanding ourselves as God's son and daughters, as having been named by God, and the good we do others.

Stan is the son of a bricklayer from east Texas. From early on, it was clear that Stan was different. First, he went to college, the first in his family to do so, and then went on to Yale to get a Ph.D. in Christian ethics, and then on to teach at Notre Dame before going to Duke. What he became was far different than what his father was, and his own sense of right and wrong was far more finely tuned than his father's, for whom the "N word" was casual and constant. Now, as Stan tells the story each time he called home while at Yale, his father went into some detail about the deer rifle he was making, a labor requiring considerable skill and time. As Stan said, that was fine since it has nothing to do with him. But one summer when he visited home, no sooner was he in the door than his father thrust the nearly completed gun into his hands. It was beautiful, and

Stan recognized it, but also, flushed with his own sense of virtue, immediately said, “Of course, you realize that it will not be long before we as a society are going to have to take all these things away from you people.” As Stan himself summed up the story: “Morally what I said still seems to me to be exactly right as a social policy. But that I made such a statement in that context surely was one of the lowest points of my moral development.”

The problem, of course, was that this wasn't just a gun and it wasn't just anybody who was showing it to Stan. It was shown by his father, and part of what he was doing was saying that someday this would be Stan's. For a man who never knew how to express affection this was a way of saying that what he had worked hard on he wanted to give his son because he cared about him. Stan's problem, no matter how right his principles were, was that he had forgotten who he was talking to, and who he himself was, namely the man's son, and, despite everything else, he was loved by this man. He had failed to be a moral grown-up, he had failed to be a moral self, because he had failed to look at others and put his own self in relation to his own father.

Sometimes, therefore, becoming the person whom God calls us to be, is a matter not just of getting on a high moral horse. Sometimes the only way of becoming the person whom God calls us to be, sometimes the only way of growing up morally and spiritually, of hearing our name called, and doing ourselves a good turn is matter of taking others seriously and learning to understand them for what they are.

Responding to a call is not just responding to a good idea, and being good is not just a matter of having the right principles, the right gifts and the willingness to donate those gifts, although responding to a call does involve these things. It is a matter of responding with ourselves, with our whole history of who we are, and with a willingness to become the very people God has called us to be, and to deal with all of God's other children in such a way that

treats them as people whose name God has also called.

Understanding that goes a long way towards being able to hear a call even when we don't hear voices calling our names out loud in the night, or when we don't have the Lord walk right up to us and tell us to follow. The problem of discerning a call is rarely a matter of being told explicitly, it is a problem of being willing to respond *personally*. Samuel may have heard his name, but he still had to respond by saying, "Here I am, Lord." Nathaniel may have received a personal invitation, but he still had to leave everything. And what that means is that the guarantee that it is a real call is less that the invitation is engraved, and far more a matter that our conscience hears the need and that we in order to be faithful to God and ourselves take that need as calling us to do something about it. The great Italian poet Dante once observed that "he who sees the need but awaits the call has already set his spirit to refuse it." To hear the call, to hear your name, is to look for the need, and to understand that your very being is bound up with it.