

“On Call”

Isaiah 49:1-7; I Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

January 15, 2017

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

Taxi drivers and doctors know something about being “on call.” We can think of others, of course. Pastors. EMS responders. Fire fighters and police officers. Nurses. There are two points to this message:

- Each of us is “on call” for the Lord.
- The Lord has not forgotten or forsaken us.

I have helped credential United Methodists for ordination as clergy for many years. I served on the Conference Board (the final step) for 12 years, have returned to being a candidacy mentor (the early steps) and have informally mentored a number of colleagues. An essential part of a candidate’s readiness for ministry is their ability to articulate God’s “call” to them, the way God has uniquely touched and changed their life and beckoned them to full-time service in the Church.

But it is not just the ordained who are called. As people of faith generally, and as Christians specifically, all of us are “on call,” available for the Lord’s bidding and the Lord’s work.

Today’s scriptures speak this truth. Isaiah said the Lord called “before I was born.” The Hebrew word “called” means “announced by name.” In First Corinthians, Paul declares he was “called to be an apostle” and that the people of Corinth were “called to be saints.” If you know Corinth’s reputation for vice and immorality you especially appreciate the scandal of Paul’s assertion, but also its invitation: you can’t get off the hook of God’s call by saying “I’m not good enough” or “I’m not worthy enough.” Nonsense! In the Greek New Testament, the word “called” means “appointed.” So we are “on call” for God because God knows our name and appoints us to follow.

Now, without much imagination we will recognize that this requires us to DO something. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is “What are you going to do for others?” God’s call “on” and “to” our lives means admitting we are not yet all God intends we be. This call means being willing to let God’s love grow in us. It means claiming the gift of our particular call. To respond to this call is, in the words of Frederick Buechner:

“an extraordinary new adventure. Your life is no longer your own. You are not any better than you ever were. Certainly no new sanctity or wisdom or power suddenly descends. You are nonetheless on call in a new way. You start moving through the world as a follower of what people see as either the world’s oldest and most impossible dream or the holy, living truth itself. In unexpected ways and at unexpected times people of all sorts...make their way to you, looking for something that often they themselves can’t name any more than you can name it for them. Often their lives touch yours at the moments when they are most vulnerable, when some great grief or gladness or perplexity has swept away the usual barriers we erect between each other...but far ahead the road goes on anyway. We must follow it if we can, because it is our road; it is his road. When you come right down to it, it is the only road that matters.”

“The Road Goes On” from A Room Called Remember (1984)

All of which bring us to today’s Gospel, John the Baptist’s “Ah-ha!” moment. Once he sees Jesus he recognizes that Jesus is the One whom he foretold. This “ah-ha” moment should not seem strange to us. We all have them, those moments when we’re not quite sure what we’re looking for but we’ll know it when we find it. A relationship. A career. A major life decision. For John the Baptist, Jesus is just such an experience. He knows now that he has found “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

This call that God places on us bids us follow. And when we do, like the two disciples in the Gospel, we will be asked, “What are you looking for?”

What ARE we looking for? Peace? Or the peace which passes all understanding? Riches? Or the riches which neither moth nor rust consume? To be served? Or to serve? Being “on call” means knowing what we’re looking for.

In John’s story, the disciples asked Jesus where he was staying. Always in John’s Gospel, what we see and hear is not all of what we get. The disciples were not looking for a hotel room number, but for an encounter. Jesus’ responded in kind: “Come and see:” not a place, but a spirit. Not a geographical cure, but a spiritual inspiration.

At the outset I said there were two points to this message. You have heard the first, that we are on call for the Lord. The second one is related, of course: that God has not forgotten or forsaken us. For how can God forget or forsake those whom God calls? Some of us – I’m only pointing one finger (to myself) – have to be reminded of this from time to time, even after nearly 40 years of ministry. But I’m not naming any names.

So let’s get to it. This is a story about Rick, a model railroading friend of mine for many years who has given me permission to tell this story. He is an extraordinary model builder whose work has appeared in “Model Railroader” magazine, the gold standard of the model train hobby. Rick was also a professional railroader on the Housatonic Railroad. I give this pedigree especially for those – like Tom Griggs, Sr. and David Doyle – who are train nuts like me. Rick is also a bright, witty, fun and engaging person. Here is the e-mail exchange that reminded me again that God has not forgotten or forsaken us:

Sunday, January 8, 2017, 11:15 a.m.

Hi, Brian: Hope all is well with you and your family and Christmas was good.

I was hoping you could say a special prayer for me. I believe I've told you that I haven't seen my daughter in many years. I know she got married and I just discovered that she has 2 daughters; I had no clue that I was a grandfather.

I mailed a note to her today telling her that I think of her often and that I love her and I would hope we could put the past behind and work together to pick up the shattered pieces of our relationship and begin anew.

What the outcome will be I have no idea. I guess I have to leave it in her hands and God's. I'm asking you Brian if you have a special prayer you could say to help my daughter and I re-establish the father-daughter relationship we once had. In March she will be 38.

As ever, Rick.

Since this is a personal friendship and came to my personal e-mail, I did not see it for nearly 32 hours. You'll understand the importance of that in a moment. On Monday of this week at 7 p.m. I replied:

Oh, Rick, I'm so sorry! Yes, you have told me this. I will certainly keep you and all your family in prayer.

A note was a good approach. It isn't as intrusive as a telephone call might be.

I do think you have to leave it in her hands and God's. I have a devotional each morning and evening. I will pray for you, your daughter and her family this evening.

If it helps at all to talk, I'm happy to get together. You can let me know. Whatever your thoughts, no worries. Brian

Two hours later, Monday night at 9 p.m., Rick replied:

Hi, Brian. Thanks for getting back to me: much appreciated. I know I'm "preaching to the choir" when I tell you this. I gave a talk at the Stratford Library yesterday on Penn Station. I had also mailed the note to my daughter yesterday AM. After I gave my talk, a young lady came up to me; it was my daughter! Brian, I was speechless! I hugged her like there was no tomorrow. She then said "come over here" and said she would like me to meet my 2 granddaughters. I had no idea I was a grand-pa. There is no doubt (not that I ever had any) that there are miracles and there is a God.

It was totally by coincidence my mailing the note and Lisa being at the library. In any event, we are off to a great start and God willing, it will continue. Thank you for your concern and saying a prayer. As ever, Rick.

Well, it has continued and Rick is here today with his wife Christine to honor this God who never forgets or forsakes us.

It is worth noting that God had already acted on Sunday by the time I got around to praying Monday night. The only exception I take, Rick, is that if mailing the note and your reunion with Lisa WAS coincidence, it was just God choosing to remain anonymous. It is worth sharing a final comment of Rick's, especially for those who have suffered long:

This is, without a doubt, a miracle from God. It just proves you have to believe. It took 15 years, I guess God felt the time was ripe.

As Dr. King said: "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." As Jesus said, "Come and see." Let us hear God's call to us, knowing God never forgets or forsakes us. Amen.