

Trinity Episcopal Church
Lawrence, Kansas
Sermon for January 24, 2009
The 3rd Sunday After the Epiphany ~ Year C ~ Luke 4:14-21
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Good morning!

This sermon is about calls. There are all sorts of calls but this is about a specific kind of call. I am talking about a call from God in a very different way.....an actual call for us to use our talent, time, and treasure for his Kingdom. But God's call to us goes even deeper than this.

This gospel reading is set at the time when Jesus had just returned from the wilderness, having spent 40 days and nights. In the wilderness, he was away from all community and lacked nearly everything except the opportunity to know God. You may recall the stories about Satan tempting him during this time. Clearly this was an important formational time for Jesus. For shortly after returning from the wilderness, Jesus goes to the synagogue in Nazareth where he preaches for the first time in his home town. He reads from the Book of Isaiah and after the reading, Jesus proclaims that the scripture has been fulfilled in its hearing. If there had been any question as to what his call was, it was now abundantly clear to Jesus.

From this point on, Jesus would experience things and witness signs that would validate this call. The miracles, the healings, raising people from the dead, and his incredible insights to scripture that come from divine inspiration would continue to validate his call and that indeed the scripture in Isaiah had been fulfilled.

And yet his declaration that the scripture had been fulfilled was met immediately with such doubtful questioning as "Isn't this the son of Joseph, the carpenter? How can this be?" Jesus' call would take him on a journey where the Pharisees, those pious religious leaders of the time, would be convicted by Jesus' words and reject the claim that he was the Messiah. Others would be perplexed that this man of God would actually befriend a tax collector. And Jesus found himself in situations that we would find not only uncomfortable, but even dangerous. And in following his call, Jesus in the end he was arrested, tried and crucified. Through all of this, Jesus was obedient to God's call even unto death. His obedience to God's call placed his will in perfect sync with God's.....God's will and his will in perfect rhythm.

Each and every one of us has a call. Each of us has talents and gifts that God created in us. As in Paul's letter to the Corinthians read today we all have different gifts and we are to strive for the greater gifts. Last Sunday Father Pogue mentioned this Chinese saying in his sermon: "The nightingale does not sing because it has joy but it sings because it has a song." Each of us has a "song" that we "need to sing." And when we "sing" this song...that is to strive for this greatest gift from God... it is then that we experience God's presence in our lives and find joy.

Last week we had an election and several of you were elected to serve on vestry. This represents a call to leadership from the parish. This call is validated by the body of Christ....this community of faithful believers called Trinity. And Trinity itself has just now completed its parish survey in order to find a new rector. Hopefully this will allow us to reflect upon who we are as a parish so that we may name what are our greatest gifts are. It is essential that we lift up our greatest gifts in answer to God's call as Trinity issues a call to a priest a priest who will see this as God's call for him or her as well. The vestry and search committee will experience moments of grace, receive signs and realize God's provision in this process. Yet, like Jesus' call, there will be times which are uncomfortable and maybe even painful. But in following God's call, there will be joy in experiencing God's presence in their lives.

What do I mean by "moments of grace," signs," and "provision" as we follow God's call? Allow me to

share with you the experience of my own journey in following my call to become a deacon. It started in my last days of high school as I thought about either pursuing medicine or attending seminary to become a minister. I had an aunt and an uncle who really wanted me to become a minister. My aunt Elsie was the stereotypical church lady and my uncle Helm was the Rev. Rath, an ordained minister. Ultimately I decided to pursue medicine for very secular reasons at the time, but I realize now that, back then, I was ill-prepared for ordained ministry. Certainly I did not receive a call to ministry and thankfully so. It was a few years ago that I revisited this possible call to ordained ministry. I spent a year doing prison ministry one day a week that was uncomfortable and at times seemed risky. I would spend two years at Kansas School for Ministry that was challenging and stretched me in many different ways. A discernment committee composed of faithful fellow Trinitarians asked me questions about what was in my heart which was uncomfortable at times and even painful. Yet there were signs, moments of grace and provision that validated this call.

To illustrate this, let me share an amazing moment that occurred during my discernment process. I had just found out that I was to deliver my first sermon at Trinity. Just like Jesus in the Gospel reading, I would be delivering a sermon for the first time in my home town. It was Lent and Father Jensen was leading a bible study on Galatians. There were about 20 people in the bible study. On this particular day, Father Jensen planned to read from one of the many translations of the bible and then was going to ask some of us to read the same verse from a different translation. He had brought seven different translations of the bible with him. As he began to pass them out randomly to the class, he began to talk about me, which unnerved me. He stated that in a few weeks I was going to be delivering my first sermon at Trinity. I was feeling very uncomfortable as he walked around the room and spoke about how this was part of my discernment process. As he walked toward me, he handed me one of the seven bibles that he had brought with him. Feeling awkward and uncomfortable, all I could do was stare at the bible just handed to me. My downcast eyes were desperately trying to avoid any eye contact with the rest of the people in the room. To take my mind off of Fr. Jensen's monologue about my discernment to ordained ministry, I decided I would open up the bible to see to whom it might belong. Now recall there were 20 people in the room and seven bibles but I just happened to receive this particular bible. When I opened up the bible, there was a note written on the inside cover. It read "Dear Stephen, Congratulations on completing high school. Soon you will be leaving to go to college to learn how to earn a living. We hope that you use this bible to learn how to live a life worth living. With love, your Aunt Elsie and Uncle Helm."

This was the very aunt and uncle that had wanted me to go to seminary. This bible was their gift to me and had been missing for over 10 years ever since I had taught Sunday school when my oldest son was in first grade. And now at a particular moment when I was feeling extremely uncomfortable and wondered whether the people of Trinity would embrace me in my call to be ordained, I was reunited with my graduation bible. In this moment, I received a note from an aunt and uncle who had encouraged me to become a minister at a time when I needed to hear that validation once again. In that moment, my fears and doubts about my call were laid to rest. And it was joy I found knowing God was present in my life.

So what will it mean to us in following God's call? What will be required of us to follow that call effectively? In answer to these questions, I received an inspiration from the USA Weekend magazine. A week ago there appeared an article from Stephen Covey talking about effective ways for Americans to get along. The article listed Stephen's seven effective ways on how to get along. I decided that I would come up with my own list and call it Stephen's Seven Effective Ways to Follow God's Call. To illustrate these seven ways, I asked that a photo be printed in your parish bulletin. Please take a look at that picture now. I had received this photo along with a story over the internet. The picture was taken in a California zoo. Let me read you the story.

A mother tiger had given birth to a rare set of triplet tiger cubs but, unfortunately due to complications, the cubs were born prematurely. Because of their tiny size they died shortly after birth. The mother tiger, after recovering from the delivery was starting to decline in health. Physically there could be nothing found that was wrong with her but she was not surviving. Veterinarians determined that maybe the loss of her litter had caused the tigress to fall into depression and (she) no longer seemed to care to eat or take care of herself. They were

hoping that they could get surrogate cubs and maybe she might improve. After checking with other zoos they were unable to find any tiger cubs of the right age to be introduced to the mourning mother. They decided that they would try something that had never been done before. They knew that sometimes a mother of one species would take on the care of a different species. The only “orphans” that could be found quickly were a set of weaning pigs. The zoo keepers wrapped each piglet in a fabric that looked like tiger skin and placed the babies around the mother tiger. Fortunately they did not become pork chops but the mother adopted them and cared for them as if they were her own cubs. This is a remarkable photo of these baby piglets asleep in a row on a contented mother tiger.

As I was looking at this picture, I realized that this represents in many ways how to effectively follow God’s call. So here they are. Stephen’s Seven Effective Ways to Follow God’s Call:

One...We have to put on the clothes of those we serve. In order to meet people where they are and to allow ourselves to serve them we often have to follow the customs, clothing, and language; whatever is needed in order for us to get close and identify with those we serve.

Two...We strive for the greatest gift that we have to offer to God at any given time. We offer that talent, time and treasure that we possess. In this case, the piglets were only able to offer their greatest gift....their ability to suckle!

Three...Often we are led to do something we normally wouldn’t do. What we sometimes are called to do looks foolish or risky or unreasonable to others. To fully understand what this means, think of the piglets as baby Jayhawks and that is a Missouri tiger!

Four...Service is done with a sense of affection or attachment. We cannot truly serve if we are detached from those we serve. When we serve Christ in others, it is to be done with the love of Christ.

Five...Our call to service can have an effect on others that we never expected nor could possibly imagine. These piglets had no idea what a healing effect they would have on the tigress. When we follow God and invite Christ into our midst, what is ordinary becomes extraordinary.

Six...Our ministry seems to change with time. We know that these piglets will eventually grow and become weaned. What we are called to do today may eventually change as well. As we continue to follow God’s call, it is no surprise that the call may change with time.

Seven...When we give of ourselves and serve Christ in others, we too are nourished. Literally what we receive is tiger’s milk for our souls!

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to live as one of us, to look like one of us and to love us just as we are. It was God’s love for us that allowed his son to be the Lamb of God. . . .mena-iti-katapai. . . a perfect sacrifice for us. It is this love that is so profound that if we embrace the full measure of it in our hearts, then we are compelled to do no other than be obedient to God’s call. Let us, with humble and penitent hearts, wrap God’s love around us so that we, cloaked as Christ, and may enter into those places that would otherwise be uncomfortable, foolish, or fearful. . . those places where often we are called by God.