

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

September 24, 2017
3rd Sunday in Called to Life
Matthew 4:18-22

Called to Follow

Of the many associations we have with the month of September, one is paramount—especially in a university community like ours—school. Or maybe more generally education that is at the core of what school is all about. MSU always leads the way with the new academic year already underway when we turn the calendar from August to September. Elementary and secondary schools are not far behind. And then we, in the church, get our own educational enterprise going a week after Labor Day. In most all of these educational enterprises there is an end goal—graduation, certification, degree completion, confirmation, etc.—as well as a means to get to that goal—curriculum, lesson plans, text books, reading, writing, and research among other activities.

By the way, a quick little anecdote that I think about whenever the word research comes up. One of my college professors used to joke that reé-search is what one does before a Ph.D. and reh-search' is what one does from then on.

In any case, the task of education is to prepare the student for a new reality such as certifying one prepared to practice a particular profession or skill. Most often, the sequence is to make a decision of what one wants to do, and then to pursue and obtain the required training and knowledge to achieve that goal.

Sometimes, and maybe even most often, that education and training is for job and career preparation. But other times it might be a class or course to learn a new skill in the arts or athletics. Or to get your driver's license or pilot's license.

Many of the educational enterprises and institutions hire full time staff to entice people to consider them with the end goal of recruiting them to enroll. In addition to college and university recruiters there are recruiters for other pursuits as well, such as the those who recruit for the military with the goal of enlisting new recruits.

Earlier in my career I was a recruiter for one of our denomination's theological seminaries. It was my job to both encourage people to even consider becoming a prospective seminary student, as well as to then entice such prospective students to enroll in the seminary for which I worked—which by the way is McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. The way that recruiters like me worked is to know the school's unique strengths that sets it apart from others, and then convince prospective students that our program, our curriculum, our community of faculty and students, and our context is ideally suited to thoroughly prepare students to fulfill and live out their calling to Christian ministry, most of whom were seeking ordination as Christian pastors or ministers.

In our church as in many other Christian churches, there is a whole series of steps that one must take, one of which is obtaining a seminary degree, before one is deemed ready for ordination. It sometimes comes as a surprise to those who sense a calling to ordained ministry that there is more to it than the simple responding affirmatively to that inner sense of call.

Today, in our 10:30 service, we have an opportunity to celebrate another calling within the church—that is the calling to serve the Presbyterian Church in one of 2 other ordained offices—that of Elder and of Deacon. One of the distinctive features of our Presbyterian or Reformed theology is that we affirm that ordination—setting apart those who have been called to particular service within the church—is not reserved for ministers or pastors only. Those who are ordained as elders and deacons as

well as as ministers of word and sacrament, are ordained for life. While in active service 3 years at a time, once a term of service is up, the status as an ordained officer is retained for life.

In any case though, those who we ordain as elders and deacons also go through a period of training and preparation before they are ordained. While it is not as lengthy a process as it is for ministers, those ordained as elders and deacons are required to meet basic training requirements.

I mention these examples of calling—calling to be an elder, deacon or minister, as well as a calling to other occupations and careers that require specific training—because of the year-long focus that we’ve begun in our church around the theme of calling. We’ve named it a Year of Call.

In addition to the focus on calling that we’ll be pursuing in worship, that emphasis will be found in much of what the church does beyond Sunday worship. For example, if you haven’t heard yet, over the next month to month and a half, a series of classes are being offered to as many people within n our church family as is possible. It’s our Called to Life classes that are being offered in 4 different options, with the hope that most everyone will be able to participate.

As we begin this year of call though, it’s important for us to take a look at the first call that we experience as Christians. And as we do that I want to make clear today that this calling is fundamentally different from the other callings that I’ve mentioned so far. The calling of which I am referencing is the call to follow that comes from Jesus. And what is different about answering that call to follow is that there is absolutely no preparation required.

Now wait a second you might say. Didn’t I read in the bulletin that there is a membership information class coming up this coming Saturday? Doesn’t that imply that one must fulfill some sort of requirements for membership in the church? And of course shouldn’t that be the case if one is taking such a big step to join a Christian church?

Well, yes and no. Yes, it is important that one understand what one is getting into when joining the church as it is when joining any other organization. But the no part of that answer is that membership in the church is not necessarily synonymous with answering Jesus’ call to follow. Church membership can be an important way to live out that call—a very important way—but it is not an initial requirement.

Now this flies in the face of what we’ve been talking about. One commentator puts it this way. “In our ministries of ‘discipleship making’ (new member/evangelism), we often follow a model of ‘know, grow, go’—teaching the doctrines of the church, trusting in Christian growth through knowing, and then embracing folks into the fellowship and ministry of the church. In Jesus’ plan, our plan is reversed: go (or follow), grow, know.” (Mark S. Adams, *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 1*, Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson, gen. eds., © 2013 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 64) Go (or follow), grow, know.

This is exactly what we see when we hear the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. Jesus was walking along the Sea of Galilee one day and he comes upon 2 fishermen who are brothers. They’re doing their routine of casting nets into the sea when Jesus comes up to them and simply says, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” This is a rather curious thing to say, but it was enough to get their attention, because the next thing we read is, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” And then as if that were not enough, he does it right away with 2 more brothers who were also fishermen who “Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”

Many have commented on the immediacy of this decision to follow Jesus. That can't really be the way it happened can it? I mean didn't they need to turn over their nets and boats and other fishing equipment to someone else before they followed? Didn't they need to go say good-bye to their families and friends before they followed? Didn't they need to pack for the journey?

The answer to all of those questions is no, no, no. They didn't need to do anything in preparation for following Jesus—nothing, nothing at all. Immediately they left their nets, their boat and their father, and followed Jesus.

This is the writer of Matthew's gospel's way of making it absolutely clear that nothing is required before one accepts the call to follow to Jesus.

You know, we human beings with all our intellect and smarts really like to make some things more complicated than they really need to be. Sometimes we over-think things. And when we do, we can make something that is simple and profound into something complicated and elusive.

My friends—sisters and brothers—today is the day that we hear the call of Jesus to follow. Many here today first heard that call decades ago. Some have heard it more recently. And some may be hearing it for the first time today. Come and follow me and I will make you fish for people.

Remember though that even though we're reminded today that the customary know-grow-go sequence is reversed when it comes to Jesus calling, the go or following of Jesus' call is followed by the growing and knowing.

Through our Year of Call, each and every one of us is being invited to follow or renew that call to follow as we grow in faith and grow in knowledge. And as we embark on this journey together, we do so with a profound sense of gratitude to God for the gift of the church—Christian community—of which we are a part.

Mark Adams, a Presbyterian pastor, tells a story that I think can help us get a glimpse of where we're headed. I want to close with his story. He says,

When I was ministering with the children in a summer camp, I led a study on the church. To begin the lesson, I asked the children to draw a picture of the church. My assumption was that the children would draw a picture of the church building. One eight-year-old girl did not "go along with the program" and stole my lesson.

She had five pictures drawn on her paper. In the upper left corner, she drew a picture of a woman in bed with people surrounding her. She explained that that was her grandmother in a hospital bed and the people around her were the pastor and members from the church praying for her healing. In the upper right corner, she drew a picture of a can. She said that there were hungry people in the world and God does not want people to be hungry so the church shares its food. In the bottom right corner, she drew a picture of a group of children playing. In the bottom left corner, she drew music notes with people of different sizes and of different colors. She said that God loves all people, and the church gathers to sing thank-you to God. In the middle of the paper, big enough to invade the space of each picture's space and to unite them, she drew a big heart—God is love, and we are called to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. (*ibid.* p. 66)