

THE CALL OF ST. PAUL

So, Ananias went and entered the house. He laid hands on Saul and said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit. Acts 9:17

Today we continue our series on adapting to change. One story in the New Testament that demonstrated a dramatic life changing experience is that of Paul in the book of Acts. I have heard people who have not heard of St. Paul use the term "Road to Damascus experience." This story teaches us the many ways God calls individuals to service.

Many of you may remember the basic outline of the story. Paul was born with the name Saul in the city of Tarsus. Tarsus was a city in what is now Turkey. It had a diverse population of citizens. This included a significant Jewish community. By the early first century, there were Jewish enclaves in many cities in the Roman Empire. Saul was a very devote Jew. He went to Jerusalem for further study. While in Jerusalem, Saul comes into contact with some fellow Jews who believe the ancient prophecies of a Messiah have been fulfilled in Jesus. They speak of a man who has been raised from the dead.

Saul and most other Jews rejected this teaching. They believed it to be heresy to speak of God being in the flesh. Some Jewish officials tried to stop this movement from spreading. Saul was present when the Deacon Stephen was stoned to death because of his teaching. Saul did not throw any stones himself, but he approved of the actions of those who did. Saul became a part of the Jewish officials who sought to persecute the Christian movement. He learned that this movement had spread beyond Jerusalem. There were followers of the way in Damascus.

So, Saul was commissioned to travel to Damascus to arrest these Jewish Christians. During his journey Saul had a profound experience of Christ. There was a great light and he heard a voice that asked "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?" A short dialogue took place where Jesus told Saul who he is. Saul was directed to proceed to Damascus.

This is the part of the story most people know. Most people generally believe that Saul is blinded by the light and is transformed into Paul the apostle. But that is not the full story. It misses out on the crucial role that Ananias plays in the story. Ananias was a follower of Jesus in Damascus. He did not have any special role in the community. He was not a leader of the Church.

Ananias had a vision in which he was told to go to Saul and pray over him. Can you imagine his fear? Saul had been tasked with arresting Christians in the city and now Christ wants Ananias to pray over him. Yet Ananias went to Saul and cared for him. He accepted him as a brother and Saul was baptized and became Paul, the follower of Jesus.

This story teaches two aspects about God's call of St. Paul.

First there is the direct experience of God's call. Paul has this wonderful theophany on the way towards the city. But there is the second call of the Christian Community. Ananias stands for the whole Christian movement in accepting the reality of Paul's call.

I believe this story teaches us a fundamental truth about leadership in the Christian Community, a truth that we ignore at our peril. This truth is that leadership is a calling. Leadership in the Christian Church is not something that comes through self-selection and volunteering but rather from a call from the community. This truth is demonstrated in another story.

The year was 374 AD. It had been only sixty years since the Edict of Milan had been issued by Emperor Constantine. This edict ended persecution by allowing for religious toleration. It would be several more years until Christianity would be declared the official religion of the empire.

There were large Christian communities all over the Roman World. This was very true in the city of Milan. But this large community of Christians was bitterly divided. They were involved in a theological controversy that dwarfs anything the church is experiencing today. It was a time of bitter division that would only be surpassed during the reformation.

The issue of the day struck at the heart of the faith. The seminal issue of the fourth century was the nature of the Trinity. One group held fast to the Nicene formulation of three equal persons Father, Son and Spirit united by love in the Godhead. A second group called Arians did not believe that the Son was equal to the Father.

When the Bishop of Milan died in 374 AD it looked like a big battle would be fought over which side would get their way. This was not merely a war of words – there was a threat of violence in the air. In those days the community elected Bishops. Many believed that this meeting could lead to a riot.

Because of the potential of civil unrest, the Roman Governor of Milan decided to attend. Ambrose was thirty-seven at the time. He had been raised in a Christian family but had never been baptized. His father had been a Roman civil servant and Ambrose had followed in his footsteps. Ambrose had been educated in Rome studying law and rhetoric. He was made governor of the northern provinces with headquarters in Milan which was then following Rome the second capital in Italy.

Ambrose, as a good leader, decided to be present at the election of the new Bishop to prevent a crisis from becoming violent. During this meeting he addressed the crowd asking for order and appealing for good will on both sides. His speech was interrupted by calls from the crowd – Ambrose for Bishop, Ambrose for Bishop. The whole assembly took up the shout and Ambrose was elected Bishop.

Remember Ambrose was not even baptized. But after a short period of intensive study, in one week Ambrose was baptized, ordained and consecrated as Bishop of Milan. He went on to become one of the most effective leaders the church has ever seen. He was instrumental in the conversion of Augustine.

Now why would I tell this story? I believe this story reflects the Biblical understanding of vocation or call. God's call most often comes to us through external voices.

This is contrary to modern understanding and practice. We all too often believe that the primary call of God is an internal subjective experience. There is a crisis in leadership in almost all Christian denominations. There are not enough men joining the Roman Catholic Priesthood to meet the sacramental needs of the church. In places such as the Diocese of Chicago there is one priest for every 1500 Roman Catholics. In the Protestant denominations the problem is not so much quantity as quality. There are just not enough men and women of skill and stability who are seeking ordination in Protestant Churches.

Part of the reason for this is the assumption that those who are to be considered for leadership will be inspired by the Spirit to present themselves for ordination. We act as if a real call to Christian leadership begins with an inward experience. The church in America continues to operate with the assumption that God will push forward those who are truly called.

The same is true in the way most Protestant Churches seek lay leadership. Nominating Committees in Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist, and Baptists Churches often meet to find people to serve on Sessions, Vestries, Councils and Boards of Ministry. They often gather with the unspoken agenda of who wants to serve or who can we get to volunteer to serve.

This is not the only way God operates in the Bible. I do not deny that God speaks to the heart of individuals. I am sure that many have experienced the nudging of the Spirit at some point in our lives. God does speak to us in the silence of meditation, prayer and the reading of Scripture. The still small voice does inform us.

But in the New Testament vocation is more often an active external call. Notice in the Gospels how Jesus gathered his leadership team. Jesus did not just give talks and wait for volunteers to come to him asking to be part of his movement. In almost every case the disciples were simply called by Jesus to follow him. Jesus told Simon and Andrew to follow him and he would make them fishers of men. He told James and John to leave their nets and follow. He saw Levi the tax collector and called him to follow him. In almost every case the call was initiated by Jesus and not by the disciple.

This pattern is continued in the call of Ambrose to be Bishop by the community of faith. Ambrose did not push himself forward. He was on a career path towards great political power. Ambrose had no intention of becoming a Bishop. It was the voice of the community that called him to service.

The same should be true today. Leadership in the church should not be automatically given to those who put themselves forward, or to those who say God has called them to serve. Leadership should be given to those that the community calls to service. The call comes to the individual through the voice of the community.

I do not believe that Jesus just went around randomly choosing people to be a part of his inner circle. I do not think we are to believe that Jesus did not know the people he called into leadership. Jesus had lived almost thirty years in northern Israel. He had interacted

with countless people through the years. They had been his neighbors, he had heard their stories, and he knew their reputations. Jesus was not calling strangers. Jesus gathered a diverse group that would form the early leadership team of the Christian movement.

In the same way the Christians of Milan knew Ambrose. He had been their governor- they had seen the quality of his person and leadership. Thus, they knew that he was just what they needed to lead them through a time of crises.

I believe that the external call is more important than an internal call for one simple reason – most often others can see our potential better than we can. Just think of Jesus' call of Peter. Peter was a fisherman. That was the life he knew. Peter might have had a deepening religious experience. He might have believed he could grow in his faithfulness. But Jesus saw much more. Jesus saw Peter the rock of which he would build his church. Jesus saw something in Peter that Peter could never imagine.

The Christians in Milan knew Ambrose and saw in him the potential to be a great Bishop. So almost against his will he was called to service and became one of the most effective and persuasive leaders in the Christian Church of all time.

So how does this relate to this congregation?

First, this informs the work of the Pastoral Nominating Committee. All too many times PNC's have taken a passive stance. They have put the Church's information into the call process and then waited until some pastor felt called to apply for the position. They seem to believe the Spirit is working only in the lives of potential pastors. Other PNC's have been more proactive, they have asked friends and colleagues and used other networks seeking leads on potential candidates.

Remember the reason I became your pastor 21 years ago was because your interim at the time called me up to ask me to apply. She knew me quite well and believed my gifts matched the needs of this congregation. I said I was not interested in moving at that time. She did not take no for an answer. After her third phone call I gave in and the rest is history. The Spirit was working through Lucille Weaver.

If you spend time in Florida or go on vacation and you worship in a Church with a minister who seems to be a good match for this congregation, let the PNC know.

The story of the call of Paul also speaks into our own individual lives. When someone asks you to teach a class or serve on the Session, Trustees or Deacons that person or group may well believe that you have gifts for service that you did not know you had. The nominating committee may well speak for the Holy Spirit.

As Paul was received into Christ's service by Ananias, may we be open to Jesus' call from the community of faith.