

# CALLING

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A Sermon preached to the All Souls UU Congregation of Colorado Springs

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The Biblical prophet Isaiah got a call from God: he describes it in the Biblical book of that name. There were angels and seraphim singing Hallelujah's, and one laid a burning coal on his lips, and Isaiah heard God say, "Whom shall I send, (into the world of pain and sin), and finally Isaiah heard himself say, "Here I am. Send Me."

Jonah got a call from God, to go to the land of Nineveh and preach holy hell to them. He figured that would get him killed, so he took ship in the opposite direction and that landed him in the belly of a whale, reminding us, if we can take this as a story rather than a history, that if you have a calling, it is dangerous to not be following it.

The Apostle Paul got a Call from God. He was riding his horse to Damascus, presumably to attempt to persuade the Jews there to leave the cult of Jesus' followers which had formed after his crucifixion. Suddenly the desert was bright with light and he heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He was so shocked that he fell from his horse, but from that day on, dedicated his life to supporting the followers of Jesus and forming the Christian church.

Stories like these give "calling" a problematic name...so supernatural, so....dangerous and so exceedingly special. So....hard to evaluate!

But a sense of calling...even a very strong or self-sacrificial one, is actually not very unusual in the human world, although you will be relieved to know that they don't mostly feature voices, or hot coals, or visions, or life-threatening tasks.

Nor do they only happen to religious people, although religious professionals talk more about their calling than most other people. But the fact is that it is likely that you have a calling, something that you just feel you are supposed to be doing...as a part of your life. Perhaps it is taking care of grandchildren, or looking in on an ailing neighbor who has no relatives. It might have come as a voice in your head, but it also might have welled up from, as Mary Chapin Carpenter says, "deep in your blood". Her criteria for knowing what's a call involves first a sense of rightness for you, and a sense that there's no real choice....there's no other way. You don't have to understand where it comes from. You just have to go.

For 10 years of my ministry I looked after a very seriously mentally ill, chronically suicidal parishioner whose predicament...for reasons I never knew...called to me. As best I could I shepherded her through mazes of medical care, social security, police wellness checks, emergency rooms, and locked wards. For months on end, every time I let myself into her apartment, I steeled myself to find her dead. My clergy support group was extremely alarmed by this activity. They felt I should be more careful with my limited energy. They wondered why I was giving so much to this one person. So did I, frankly. I let them, and the therapist who ran the group, help me probe that, but in the end, the answer was, "I just have to. I don't know why, and since it was a group of clergy, finally..."It's a calling." And finally they contented themselves with listening to all I was learning about poverty, defenselessness, mental illness, and the torn safety net of our society. Tammy stabilized in the end, and lived with much less help from me, for 10 more years. But I was the one to whom her final suicide note was addressed, and I boxed up her few things to send to her daughter. She was the epitome of an inconvenient and distressing calling, but I never regretted it.

Perhaps it's your parents, or a stray cat, or even a plot of land to leave more fertile than when you found it. Perhaps it is art to create, even though it barely pays a living. Maybe you've lately felt a call to donate to planned parenthood or get involved in the movement to limit gun violence in this nation, or to learn a little more about racism. As you look at your life, are there things that you just know that you are supposed to be doing, so..you do them? Even though perhaps inconvenient or underappreciated or just plain hard? Then you have a calling.

You don't have to believe in the guy in the sky god to feel a calling. Atheists and other non traditional believers are just as likely as traditional believers to feel a call. To atheists it feels like a conviction welling up from within, which their integrity demands they pay attention to. Theists report that the conviction starts as an invitation from without, which their integrity and faith demands they pay attention to. Not really so different.

A few years back, my parents were unable to keep the dog they loved dearly but couldn't manage, and the call came to me: That call came to me as an email. (God's new medium) Could I take poor Mosby? It would mean so much to my parents to know that he was well cared for and maybe there could sometimes be pictures?

My first thought was to take ship in the opposite direction. Not a dog person. But....well, I was a part of a big community of dog lovers. "I will find him a good home and make sure my parents get pictures." This was going to involve an intense period of retrieving him from Maryland and getting him the training they had not been able to manage; not a small matter, but in the long run, my plan was to bring him to coffee hour with a sign on his crate that said, "World's cutest dog needs love and continued training." I figured he'd be off my hands in an hour. But...it didn't work that way. Let's just say that he and I spent a few months in the belly

of the whale. Let's just say that he needed an extended period of training and that training a dog is an intensely bonding experience.

He lived with me for 7 years and we had many, uh, adventures. He even starred in a pandemic sermon...remember Mosby? I'm still not really a dog person but I was never sorry I'd answered that call. It meant so much to my parents in their last years to get pictures and stories of his antics. It was satisfying. Even in the years after they died, he was a very meaningful connection to them.

Without a calling our lives can quickly start to feel empty, sometimes painfully so. In spite of all the ways there are these days to entertain ourselves, I think that almost all of us feel the human calling to care, to contribute, to leave the world a better place. What are some things that call you? How did it happen? What do you remember?

Perhaps thinking about some of the things you are doing as a 'calling' seems too mystical or high falutin' to you, but I encourage you to do so. It reminds us of the values we hold and the responsibilities we've taken on, and the importance of those things to our lives. When it's not "just a job", or a chore, or a drudgery, but an activity that brings joy and meaning to our lives, and serves the world in some way, that's a calling. Remember Fredrick Buechner's wisdom: our calling is the place where our deep hunger meets the world's deep need.

Knowing your callings can bring you quiet satisfaction, as when, after a long day, you see that your slowest student has finally caught on to long division, or know that your mom had a good day today because you called her, or you can reflect on a bill passed, good work done by the non-profit you support financially or as a volunteer, or a small addition to the sum of human knowledge.

Knowing your callings can keep you steadfast when things get hard or you meet opposition. Feeling that we have a calling can give us courage and keep us going in hard times. But we do have to be careful. Humans are masters of fooling ourselves. It is possible to take off in directions that don't serve the world in the end, try things that we can't pull off, or just irritate the people we meant to serve. My clergy support group worried about my sense of calling. Some of the anti-vaxers felt that they had a calling. The people who stormed the Capitol probably felt that way, too. A sense of calling needs to be tested against reality, morality, and personality, and that is best done with trusted others and in the quiet of our own hearts.

Mostly, of course, we don't brag on our sense of calling, even to ourselves. Being too puffed up about one's calling can turn quickly into pride, and few things blind us to reality, morality, or personality more thoroughly than pride. We wisely keep our sense of having a calling soft and fluid in our hearts, and we only talk about it to those we can trust to understand. But I think that many, perhaps most of us, have known the feeling of finding

something in the world that, well, we just need to do. Deep in your blood, or a voice in your head....we follow it knowing there's no other way...for us...to go.

Sometimes you have to wait for your sense of calling, and that waiting can be tedious, and sometimes you are wrong. The strong sense of call to be a professional musician....I had that once....has to be tempered by the realities you discover as you start down that path, and what the world reflects back to you, and what teachers and mentors and people who care about you have to say. Ignore feedback at your peril!

The world was not, it turned out, enthusiastic about my calling to be a musician, which finally faded the year after professional ministry opened to women in our society...and in the middle of the first sermon I heard preached by a woman, I had a call that barely wavered for 45 years. What I thought was a calling to be a musician, I realized, had been part strong interest and part avoiding the academic work my brain was not ready to undertake, unsupported by the kind of talent or commitment it would have taken to succeed. That call to preach was more realistic and much more enthusiastically affirmed, and my dyslexic brain at 25 was able to manage what it hadn't coped well with at 15. No small part of that calling to spend my life serving UU churches was my experience in a UU Sunday school with that dyslexic brain; an experience of being accepted and valued for myself and what I could do well, rather than constantly hounded, as I had been in school, about how well I could spell or line up my numbers. I knew that a church could save people. It had saved me.

As I started contemplating retiring from my church in Albuquerque, I became aware of another kind of calling; to make myself helpful to churches and ministers in transition. I have done that for 5 years, and each task I took, including this one, was meaningful, interesting, and satisfying. I took this job with a strong hunch that this would be my last, and that hunch has strengthened through the year. It left a void. What next? I'm not quite ready for a life of pickleball and sudoku, my parents are gone and son doing fine and no grandchildren have yet appeared. But on the day of the leaked Supreme Court draft about Roe v. Wade, I got a strong whiff of another call...to make myself useful in the fight for the full personhood and freedom and civil rights of women. We will see.

I tell you all these personal stories because the traditional stories of calling, whales, and coals and voices from God could convince us that we never even wanted such a thing as a calling, but, you see...it is more a way of forming a pretty ordinary life. What have been your callings? What calls you now?

By the way, it's not just people who get callings. Nations get them, groups of people rise up...to stop the police violence or the poisoning of the children, for instance. Churches get callings. We'll come back to that in a moment.

That children's story, "The Dragon of Wu," magical as it is, tells us about some of the callings that come to people like us and to churches like ours.

The agnostic Mandarin, called to leadership by his fellow townsfolk, and then by his compassion for what his people needed, flung his pride to the wind and sat down to pray for a dragon he didn't believe in. This is a story which reminds us of our calling to compassion, to leadership, and to keeping open minds about many things in our lives that we do not understand.

The people of the town, who valued hospitality, were called to take the risk of extending it to a stranger even in dire times. How easy it would have been to toss him out of the city as a potential danger, or just a distraction. But, responding to the leadership of their Mandarin, to their own values and...maybe to something else, they allowed him to stay. This story reminds us that whatever calls us, or emerges from us, can save us, and can even redeem some of our suffering.

In this story, the calling to step up in a crisis is strong. Creaky elders digging graves, children struggling with chores they had only watched others do, young women taking up their wounded brother's swords... These unaccustomed activities done because there is no choice kept the town alive and ready to accept its savior dragon.

Finally, buried in the dramatic ending: our call to listen to the children, who, if we will let them, see things with their new, wide eyes.

The world's wisdom has it that denying a calling is dangerous. Remember Jonah in the belly of the whale! The Gospel of Thomas, one of the books that didn't make it into the bible says, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

I said before that institutions like congregations have a calling, and they, too, can be saved by living their calling, and they can be weakened and even deadened by refusing to live their calling. So...what is your calling, as a congregation? What are the three or four things this church is supposed to be doing?

At some point in your years together, you selected these words and phrases to articulate your calling, your purpose. "We are a welcoming community that celebrates its liberal religious tradition and its rich diversity, inspires authentic relationship and spiritual growth, and works for a more just, loving, and compassionate society." Your favorite hymn also, I imagine, speaks

to you of your purpose, to gather everyone in, without regard to the distinctions of belief and identity that so confound our foolish society, reminding you that you that this purpose is what calls you “to be light to the whole human race.”

Now that’s a calling that you probably would never articulate quite so strongly outside of a song, and it is left over from the original hymn’s Christian evangelical origin, but I’m glad it is still there. It reminds us that the calling of this congregation is one part of what we sometimes call the “arc of the universe that bends towards Justice.” That’s.....huge.

You have, it appears to me, a well-lived out call to your neighborhood; to be a good neighbor, to take care of your property, to serve those around you, to take part in the community of congregations that is here. You have had, in the past, a strong calling to nurture the children, especially, in your case, children and families experiencing the challenges of being in the LGBT community. I bet, if you look back on how that developed, you’d say that you didn’t mean to, it just happened and you just had to go with it. Right. That’s exactly how a call can work.

What now? Now that we are climbing out of this covid canyon, the congregation’s calling might change. Where will your collective great joy meet the world’s great need? In serving a variety of spiritual and theological paths? In a robust program for children or teens? In solidarity with your neighboring churches about abortion rights or immigrant justice? Something will call you. I invite you to listen.