

Protagonist Corner

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Every morning on the way to my school I pass by a church. Like many churches, this one has a sign out by the street. Sometimes what that sign says will catch my eye; sometimes what it *doesn't* say will catch my eye, too.

One morning as I passed by there was only one word on the sign. Maybe they had not finished putting up a sentence they had planned to put there, or maybe the one word left was from a phrase they had used up for the week and had taken down. For whatever the reason, the one word left was "Call." That was it. "Call."

That lonesome word made me think that it had been a long time since I had heard my ministerial students speak confidently about their "call" to ministry. Was there something in the culture of the theological school and the churches they served that inhibited them from fully developing a sense of call? Students, it seemed, were reluctant to profess their call *to* ministry because "call" was held captive by the profession *of* ministry. As preachers and teachers, we need to recognize that it's time to make an effort to recover a better sense of the word for ourselves and for those we serve. We do that, I believe, by stressing that a "call from God" is not so much a summons to pick up some new credentials. It is an invitation to a collaborative relationship.

The shift from "call-as-vocation" to "call-as-job" began to happen early in my own experience. In the evangelical world I grew up in, "call" was a popular theme in Sunday school and worship. People were always talking about "getting the call." If they didn't have one already, they were looking for one. Our thinking about call was shaped by those famous narratives of certain *men* being addressed by God, sometimes in a whisper, sometimes in a voice accompanied by angelic beings, and even by means of angels themselves. Of course God had decided to change God's manner of speaking to us. We had Jesus to deal with, and what Jesus called us to do was clearly indicated in the Gospels. Preachers usually had an easier time making sense of "net-dropping" than "cross-carrying" when they tried to interpret "call" to us, even though the Gospels see a clear connection between the two. One leads to the other in Jesus' program of discipleship.

Dropping ones' nets in order to pick up a cross was clearly too radical a notion to preach in Suburbia, U.S.A. It still is, isn't it? The expanding evangelical presence in the culture needed leaders not martyrs. The church needs to identify those who would be willing to drop their plans to join the 'network' of lay Christians in order to enter the professional ranks of the clergy (which isn't, as we know, the same thing really as "picking up a cross"). Those who made the appeals to others to enter "a life of full time Christian service" often used the story of Simon and Andrew's abrupt call to discipleship in the Gospel of Mark (1:16-20) to show how a call from God to service can come—quickly, unbidden, with demands, but above all, dramatically. Those who answered it embarked on a hero's journey into professional ministry, a journey that when accepted, promised a measure of visibility and recognition in the faith community. It made for a great story.

As sincere as those were who made and who responded to the appeals, these interpretations of “call” made for a good deal of theological confusion. For one thing, those who were called to “special service” were awarded a measure of status and privilege not available to other “ordinary” Christians. Calls from God, it seemed, always went to men, and if women offered a story of being called into professional ministry in those days, then they were steered away from the “real” jobs available in the profession and toward the “supportive” roles. Gradually, the confusion and dissent overwhelmed the familiar connotations, and speaking of one’s call became problematic. This may be why many of my students have difficulty with it. They fear suspicion and misunderstanding not only from their examiners but from their peers as well.

I like Luke’s version of Simon Peter’s call to walk with Jesus better than I do Mark’s on this point. It gives me a different way of imagining how to preach and teach on the theme of call. You remember how Luke’s version of this story goes (5:1-11). It’s been a long night for Peter and his crew of fishermen; it’s been a long session of teaching for Jesus. The two come together in this story out of necessity. Jesus needs the resources that Peter and his fellows have (a simple fishing boat) to get the word to as many as will hear it. What Peter needs is a break and some fresh ideas about what he is already doing. What Jesus *doesn’t* need is another candidate for the rabbinate or an apprentice in carpentry. What Peter *doesn’t* need is a new theory: “Proven Strategies for Growing Your Fishing Business.” What each needs from the other is a relationship, a collaborative relationship based on trust.

Jesus’ ministry cannot be made manifest in this story without the faithful response of one person, an “ordinary” person who is struggling to make a living. Jesus needs someone like Peter who would be willing to respond to his invitation to leave the shallows and enter the depths. Peter doesn’t go out into the depths alone. He leads others to go there with him. What they discover when they go a little deeper is not a private revelation for any one of them. Peter and his crew see it together, and what they see is a manifestation of the abundance of God’s Realm that Jesus ushers in wherever he can.

One thing academics and professional ministers share is the tendency to get stuck in the ‘shallows’. There, like Peter and company, we easily become exhausted with institutional maintenance and preoccupation with techniques. There is often too little to show for our efforts. That’s when Jesus shows up and calls us into the depths of a trusting relationship with God through him. It’s funny. Peter doesn’t seem to have a question about *where* the depths are for him and for his crew. He just knows. Just like we know where the depths are for us and for our crew.

“I’m exhausted, Jesus. But if you say so . . .” and off we go.