

IT'S OUR CALL

(02/05/2023)

Scripture Lessons: Ephesians 6:1-9
1 Corinthians 12:1, 4-13, 27-31
Luke 2:22-40

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

I am not very good with remembering anniversaries; I would forget most of them if I didn't write them down in my calendar (except, of course, my wedding anniversary). I always remember the date we were married because it was the first year of the Super Bowl. I also tend to remember the anniversary of my ordination, which was this past Thursday. I was ordained in the United Church of Christ on February 2, 1969. This means that I have been ordained for fifty-four years. That's a long time! To quote Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead, “What a long, strange trip it's been!”

February 2 is the date of the celebration of Candlemas, a Christian festival to commemorate the purification of the Virgin Mary (after childbirth, according to Jewish law), and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The celebration is based on Luke 2:22-24, which describes how Mary and Jesus followed the teaching in Leviticus that says an infant boy should be circumcised on the eighth day after birth, and that thirty-three days later the mother is considered “clean” and should burn an offering at the boy's presentation at the temple on that, the 40th day.

Although, for most of us, Christmas ends either on Epiphany or when we take down our Christmas decorations, Candlemas, which comes 40 days after Christmas, is officially the end of the Christmas season. You may note that in this country we also celebrate Groundhog Day on February 2. The first record of this quaint observance comes from Austria. In 1843, an Austrian “Farmer's Almanac” contains the phrase, “If Candlemas Day be dry and fair.” It then goes on to explain (counterintuitively) that good weather on February 2 predicts a longer winter.

Among the many holy feasts in the Christian calendar, the Feast of the Presentation, or the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary on Candlemas Day is one of the oldest. It has been celebrated since the 4th century C.E. In the 6th century, responding to a plague that had struck Constantinople, the Emperor Justinian I ordered prayer processions throughout the city during the Feast of the Presentation to ask God for deliverance from the evil of the plague. By that time, the tradition of holding blessed candles in reverence had long been observed. After the plague passed, the regular celebration of Candlemas spread throughout the Roman Empire. In Poland, to this day, blessed candles are lit and placed in windows to ward off storms.

This, of course, had nothing to do with my choice of February 2 for my ordination. Not being Roman Catholic or Episcopalian, I had never heard of Candlemas. It also had nothing to do with the movie, "Groundhog Day," starring Bill Murray, which didn't come out until 1993. However, I like the symbolism of the candles and their reminder that just as Christ was "a light to the world," we should carry our tenuous little flame into the darkness that surrounds us, the darkness that seeks to envelop us and our brothers and sisters.

The past few weeks, I have found myself thinking about the matter of call. I think back to the event of my ordination, which took place in the Maple Street Congregational Church of Danvers, my home church, in 1969, and I think about my call to ministry, which took place in March of 1965 in Selma, Alabama. I think about the experience of being called to various types of ministries: parish ministry, state mental hospital chaplaincy, pastoral counseling, Jungian analysis, and teaching. I also think about my call to be the pastor of this church.

This morning, in addition to the celebration or recognition of my call, I would like you to think about your call. Because the United Church of Christ has acknowledged my call and my preparedness for ministry, I am able to administer the sacraments and serve this church as an ordained minister. I am your pastor, but, as you know, I am not the only minister. As our Sunday bulletin indicates, we are all the ministers of this church.

The epistle reading from Ephesians is an unusual passage of scripture to use as the basis of a sermon. Because of the way it begins, advising slaves to obey their earthly masters, I never took the passage seriously. I thought of it as more indicative of the way people regarded and treated slaves in the apostle Paul's day than of the way God would have us regard and treat people of a different color. However, I believe this passage has something to teach us about the difference between work and ministry.

The passage begins by telling children to obey and honor their parents. That's a good idea! It tells fathers to bring up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, and not to provoke their children to anger. That is also a good idea.

The passage tells slaves that they should obey their masters. The institution of slavery was an integral part of the social structure of biblical times, and, in fact, it has been an integral part of the social structure in all times and all cultures throughout history, including the present day. That's really sad. In biblical times, when one tribe, city, or country conquered another, the conquered were either slaughtered or enslaved.

There are many passages of scripture that support the belief that this treatment of the vanquished is the will of God. We find this offensive. We find it to be contrary to the mind and heart of Jesus. It doesn't make any difference whether it is in the Bible or not. Just because it was acceptable in the apostle Paul's day, that doesn't mean it is acceptable in ours.

The passage then tells slaves what kind of attitude they should take toward their work. Here is where the passage begins to speak to us. It tells us how we should think and feel about our work, whatever it is. It tells us about the difference between work and ministry.

The influence of the philosophical school of Neo-Platonism on early Christian thinking gave rise to what I believe are several false dichotomies.

The first of these dichotomies is the belief that heaven and earth are in two different geographical locations. Because earth is in one place and heaven is in another, we need to leave earth, perhaps by dying, to get to heaven. I don't think this is true. Heaven is right here, both among and within us! When we realize this and live within it, we are in the kingdom of heaven.

The second of these dichotomies is the belief that the sacred is different from, separate from, and more important than the secular. It leads to the belief that some places are sacred and other places are secular. I don't think this is true. Everywhere is sacred! God is everywhere, not only in this church sanctuary but also in our homes, in nature, and at our places of work.

The third dichotomy is the belief that the clergy are different from and of a higher order than the laity. It is the belief that the ordained clergy have powers that lay people do not, e.g., the power to turn the communion bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ. According to this way of thinking, the clergy are holier, have a deeper faith, or live more Christian lives than the laity.

I don't believe this is true. I may be the pastor of this church, but I have no special powers and I am not more Christian than you are. We are all lay people on a faith journey. We are all ministers, offering our ministry to this church, to our families, and to the world. We all serve as co-creators with God in the evolution of a new world, a world created by and filled with God's Spirit.

A fundamental tenet of the Protestant Reformation is the belief that all work is holy. Our scripture lesson encourages us to treat everything we do as holy, not as a job but as a ministry. If we use the gifts that God has given us to create something, to help someone, to make this world just a little bit better, we are doing what God has called us to do.

The apostle Paul tells us that there are varieties of gifts that arise from the Spirit. I may have a call to pastoral ministry, to the ministries of counseling and teaching, but we all have calls to ministry whether we are an executive or a homemaker, whether we are a nurse or an engineer, whether we work in sales or as a teacher. It doesn't matter if we are retired. The members of our church who are retired do a lot for this church and for the community. If we approach what we do, whatever we do, with the proper attitude, a job is transformed into a ministry.

Paul tells us we should be single-minded in our work, totally present to whatever we are doing. This is a basic Buddhist principle--the directive to "be here now." This quality of mindfulness is an important element in transforming a job into a ministry.

When Paul tells us that we should "render service from the heart," he is telling us that we should carry out our tasks with enthusiasm. We should do this because in the final analysis we are not working for a paycheck; we are rendering service to the Lord.

Years ago, I ran across an article in a church newsletter that I believe captures the essence of Paul's advice to both the slaves and the free people of the early church. Think about it in relation to the service you offer to this church as well as in relation to your daily life.

If you're doing something because no one else will, it's a job. If you're doing it to serve the Lord, it's a ministry.

If you're doing something just well enough to get by, it's a job. If you're doing it to the best of your ability, it's a ministry.

If you'll do something only so long as it doesn't interfere with other activities, it's a job. If you're committed to staying with it, even when it means letting go of other things, it's a ministry.

If you quit because no one praised you or thanked you, it was a job. If you stay with it even when no one seems to notice, it's a ministry.

If you do something because someone else said it needed to be done, it's a job. If you do it because you are convinced it needs to be done, it's a ministry.

It's hard to get excited about a job. It's almost impossible not to get excited about a ministry.

People may say "well done" when you do your job. The Lord will say "well done" when you complete your ministry.

An average church is filled with people doing jobs. A great church is filled with people involved in ministry.

If God calls you to do a ministry, for heaven's sake (literally) don't treat it like a job. If you have a job in the church, give it up and find a ministry. God doesn't want us feeling stuck with a job, but excited, fulfilled, and faithful to a specific ministry.

That is exactly what Paul was saying! Think about your work, whatever it is. Can you transform it from a job into a ministry? Think about what you do for your family. Can you

transform it from a job into a ministry? Think about what you do for this church. Can you make your unique contribution with singleness of purpose, from the heart, with enthusiasm, knowing that no matter how menial the task, you are rendering service to the Lord? Think about what your life would be like if everything you did was not a job but a ministry!

Although this sermon is about call, I must confess that I don't totally understand what makes a call a call. As you know, I am not a big fan of the belief that God micromanages the universe. I don't believe that I was preordained to be a minister. I believe that my awareness of what I felt I needed to do with my life gradually coalesced out of an awareness of my gifts, my strengths, coupled with an experience of the needs of the world. I believe that when our strengths, our gifts and talents intersect in a meaningful way with the needs of other people, with the needs of the world, what we are experiencing is a call. We are all called to respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters, little animals, our environment, *and ourselves*. We are called by the pain, the struggles, the needs of God's children.

I believe we are called to strengthen our relationship with God and to place this relationship in the center of our lives. As Christians, we do this by following the teachings and the example of Jesus. Arising from this relationship is the call to be ourselves fully, to affirm the uniqueness of our incarnation. If we can discover our authentic self, affirm it, honor it, and live out of it, we make the unique contribution that only we can make to life, to the evolution of life, and to God's plan—the creation of the kingdom of God on earth.

Of all guiding principles in my life, perhaps the most important has been my desire to discover and then live out my authentic self. Above all, I want to be my authentic self. Unless, of course, I could be tall, dark, handsome, really ripped, and incredibly wealthy. Then I would want to be that. However, if I can't be tall, dark, handsome, really ripped, and incredibly wealthy, which is highly unlikely since my hair is somewhere between blonde and white (not to mention that I am a little light on some of the other characteristics), then I want to be my authentic self.

Unless, of course, I could play third base for the New York Yankees and, like Graig Nettles, make a diving catch of a hard-hit ground ball over the bag, scramble to my feet, and throw the batter out at first to stifle a ninth-inning rally in the seventh game of the World Series. I believe I could still make the diving catch; it would be the part about scrambling to my feet and making a throw that seems a lot longer than it did when I was young that would be (how can I say this?) problematic. I suspect that by the time the ball got there, the runner, even if he ran like me, as if he were pulling a milk wagon, would be safely ensconced on second base. However, I want you all to know if I can't be a Hall of Fame third baseman for the New York Yankees, then I want to be my authentic self.

By the way, if any of you are wishing that you could be something or someone other than who you are, give it up. Take it from me; it is a lot better to be your authentic self.

When I left Pilgrim Church fifty years ago to answer what I experienced as a call to state mental hospital chaplaincy, several of my parishioners said that they were sorry that I was leaving the ministry. I told them I wasn't leaving the ministry; I was serving in a different type of ministry. In fact, I can't think of any higher compliment that someone could give me than to say that everything I have done in the utilization of my God-given gifts as a counselor, teacher, chaplain, pastor, or person falls into the category of a ministry.

An average church is filled with people doing jobs. A great church is filled with people involved in ministry. I can't think of any higher compliment that someone could make about this church than that we are a great church, not because we are big or rich or successful, but because everything we do, *everything* we do is a ministry!

And so, this month, on the occasion of our first annual meeting in three years and the start of a new church year, I not only celebrate the 54th anniversary of my ordination to the Christian ministry, I rededicate myself to that call both as Pastor of this church and in every aspect of my daily life. As we gather around the communion table this morning, I invite you to share in this rededication with me, celebrating *your* call to Christian discipleship and your commitment to ministry as members of this church and in every aspect of your daily life.

Remember--an average church is filled with a pastor and a bunch of parishioners who do jobs. A great church is filled with a pastor and a bunch of parishioners who are involved in ministry. Let's be a great church! It's our call!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
February 5, 2023*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later in the week.