

Sermon: Epiphany IIIA

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Church of St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

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For some years now I have served on the Commission on Ministry of the Diocese of New York. I've also, throughout my 36 years as a member of the Order of the Holy Cross, worked with hundreds of people as vocations director or spiritual director. We get used to hearing about calls: calls to ordained ministry, calls to monastic or religious life, calls to a certain career path or to one or another personal or family relationship. And all of this is usually framed with questions: Is this what God is calling me to do or be, and how do I know? Will this make me happy or fulfilled? Will this bring my life meaning? Am I equipped to do this? And the bonus question: is this what I truly desire?

Most people, especially when considering a professional religious vocation, if you will, develop a 'call narrative,' a kind of two-minute elevator speech where they sum up what has happened to them in their life that has led them to this point of considering such a life choice.

While this is a helpful tool in the process of discernment, the process of figuring out where to go in our lives no matter where we are in the life cycle, I've grown a bit suspicious about call narratives. They generally leave out as much, or more, than they express. Yes, there is often a catalyzing experience that we can point to, often in retrospect, which seems to capture a powerful moment or experience in our life, and which shapes our sense of being chosen for or directed to one way or another path. And sometimes that catalyzing experience is quite dramatic and transformative, so much so that we can date it to an exact place and time. I believe we've all had such experiences to a greater or lesser extent. But for most of us, most of the time, the experience of call and of our response to a call is slow and complex and uncertain...which is to say risky. And this applies both to calls in the narrow sense, such as that to ordained ministry or the religious life, as well as in the broader sense of life choices in general, all those decisions and options we face

about careers, commitments, where we live, how we spend our time and energy and resources, how we engage with our own selves and with others and our community and indeed with the world. Each of these kinds of choices—which are regular elements in all lives—have an element of a call in them: we are asked to respond to an invitation to a new and to what we hope is a larger life.

Some calls may prove to be temporary, whether we know it or not at the time. Other calls are lifelong. And there are always calls within calls as we grow and mature and commit and recommit to our vocational choices. We often say in the monastery: “The reason I came and the reason I stay are not the same,” though I do hope they are related. The same is true at many levels.

It's impossible to capture this complex process in a two-minute call story, though we often try. Guests frequently ask me about why I entered the monastery, so over the years I've developed my own little call narrative which usually begins with me at about age eleven seeing the Sound of Music and hearing those nuns chanting what I now know to be tone two ending one and sensing at some deep place in my heart that I want to do that, that I almost had to, that I was destined to. Of course so much more was going on than I knew at the time and that I still don't know even now sixty years later.

Today's gospel passage, the story of the call Peter and Andrew and James and John is perhaps the archetypal Christian call story. But it offers us just the barest outline of what must have been an amazingly nuanced and multilayered event. Jesus is the actor here. The disciples say nothing. Jesus calls them to follow him, and they respond by leaving their nets, leaving their families and livelihoods. But to go where? Nothing is said about the context. What do these fishermen know about this man? Have they heard talk, rumors, gossip about Jesus? Do they even recognize that this is Jesus? What does he want of them? Where does he want them to go? For how long? For what purpose? They don't know. And truthfully, most of the time, neither do we when we're confronted by a decision, a choice, an invitation, a call. We can of course weigh all the evidence. We can evaluate skills and interests and compare possible gains against uncertain losses. We might consider our social and educational backgrounds, our needs, and preferences and

commitments. We might explore the Myers-Briggs inventory or the Enneagram and take the MMPI. All of these may be helpful and sometimes even required. But like the disciples in today's gospel, we never know fully. We never have all the information. And the future will always remain, to some degree, uncertain. There is always, always a risk, a stepping out in faith in any real response.

Over the years I have met people who have labored under a theology of call or of vocation which went something like this: from eternity God has ordained a certain path for me, and my job is to figure out what that path is and then to follow it. Further, all my happiness, all my holiness depends on my finding that path, that unique way, that vocational choice without which my soul's welfare is imperiled and might salvation is jeopardized. This is a very hard and a very dangerous theology, but not an altogether uncommon one. It offers a vision of God which is, to say the least, harsh and perhaps even cruel. Yes, vocational discernment and life choices can be difficult, even agonizing. But there are ways forward, including theological ones.

When I was first working with inquirers considering monastic life, I came across a book by Trappist monk Basil Pennington titled simply "Called." In it, Pennington stresses the bounty and generosity of God in vocational discernment as well as in much other choosing. He counsels that instead of thinking of vocation as some kind of divine mystery that needs to be cracked, it is more helpful to think of God as inviting us, say, to a smorgasbord. God leads us to the table of our life and says something like: "I know you pretty well. I think you'll like that chopped liver." If you're smart, if you're wise, you'll try the chopped liver. But it's also OK to say, "Thank you. I think I'll skip the liver, but those deviled eggs look really good. I'll try those." And God will rejoice. God will work with you in the choice you have made to lead to the best possible outcome. The only way we can totally fail or totally reject God's call, and by extension our vocation, is to refuse to eat at the table at all, to say in one way or another: "I don't like your smorgasbord. I'm out of here." Beyond that, though, there is a wide freedom and generosity and joy in God's call to us.

Today is Religious Life Sunday. And certainly St. Mary's has had a long history with vowed religious working here alongside you for well over a century. We celebrate that today. Today is also the Sunday within the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity when we once again recommit ourselves to work for the full visible unity of Christ's Church at a time when it seems either less important or less possible than ever, especially as the institutional church seems to fade into relative obscurity. But these two observances are related in some important ways.

Religious life, particularly monastic life, traces its roots to and makes witness to a history that predates the division between Protestant and Catholic, which even predates the split between Eastern and Western Christianity. In fact, monastic life and its practices has been a point of meeting and dialogue not just between Christians but between many other spiritual paths and practices, especially Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi traditions. This gives me hope and helps me to understand the place of our monastic witness as a bridge toward unity and maybe even sanity. Unity at whatever level will happen in God's time to be sure, and it will happen the more faithfully and transparently we each of us lives out our calling, our vocation, our life choices and commitments. Unity, Christian unity and wider unity, will happen in God's time when we embrace the compassionate heart which is at the center of the religious quest. Unity between peoples and races and classes and tribes and nations will happen when we allow our vocation, whatever it may be, with its tough choices and struggles and sorrows and failures along with its joys shine in the world as we share openly the human struggle. It is there that God is to be found, and not elsewhere. And it is there that God's church serves and celebrates until the Lord takes her home.

Monasteries and religious houses and large urban churches such as St. Mary's have always been places where the '*nones*' (that is those who have no formal religious formation or affiliation) and the '*donees*' (those who have simply had it with institutional religion) and *seekers* of all stripes can find a resting place, a temporary refuge, and perhaps even an abiding home. That is our vocation. That is our call.

Welcome to the smorgasbord. And don't be afraid to try the chopped liver.

Amen.

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