

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 24, 2021 (2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year B; delivered on 3rd Sunday after Epiphany)
John 1:43-51

Again and again in these opening verses of John's gospel, there is one person telling another person to come and see, come and follow Jesus. John the Baptist tells two of his disciples to follow Jesus, and one of those, Andrew, tells his brother Simon Peter. Simon and Andrew seem to tell Philip and Philip tells Nathaniel.

All this talk of being called got me to thinking about MY calling. It's something people are always ASKING me about. "Why did you become a pastor?"

Well, I've BEEN your pastor for well over a year now, but because of the shutdowns, you haven't gotten many chances to get to know me. So today, if you don't mind me getting a little personal here, I'd like to tell you a little OF my story.

Now, first of all, you need to know that I wasn't ALWAYS a Christian. I became one in high school. I'll tell you THAT story another time, but more relevant for today is what happened IMMEDIATELY afterwards. That very night I wrote a poem. It was very special to me because I remember feeling like God Himself had guided my pencil. I'd been assigned to write poetry before in English class, but I had never WILLINGLY written poetry before, so it seemed odd that, in a moment of such joy, I would CHOOSE to write a POEM of all things. But I was inspired, and I didn't question it.

This is the poem I wrote. Remember, I was just a 10th grader when I wrote this, the age my SON is right now, so please forgive its simplicity. It's called The Chosen Few.

In the short lives we live
we sometimes feel down
and on our faces
can be seen a permanent frown

It becomes difficult to talk to others
but that is what we need
so we slip into depression
and inside we begin to bleed

this is where my story begins
a story that must be told
for it concerns all of us
especially the young and the old

I had fallen in deep
and couldn't climb out
I was feeling sorry for myself
and not a seed of hope would sprout

Nothing seemed to go right
I was always tired and bored
I kept to myself
because I felt ignored

I had no one to turn to
my friends didn't understand
I was frustrated and alone
with no helping hand

I wanted it all to end
I would've, I could've
but then I got a message
and that message was love

The love of God for his children
the greatest and most universal love to be found
the love that gave us Jesus Christ
the love that, if we look, is all around

He gives a few of us the ability to speak of this love
and through them he expresses his power --
the power to heal spiritually, emotionally and sometimes physically
he makes tiny miracles by the thousands every hour

Through one of these chosen few
I was saved
he told me his story as I tell you mine
and of the joys of God he raved

His story was truly inspirational
and he begged me to accept Jesus as my savior
I was entranced
I had never heard anything like it and I wanted more

As he spoke I began to feel strange
a feeling of warmth came over me
I was beginning to smile
and thought, "how can this be"

I felt so good I couldn't stop smiling
I had been depressed a long time
but I knew I'd never felt like that
it had to have been a miracle -- it was sublime

In one hour the Lord and his messenger changed my life
that I will never forget
I have accepted Jesus as my Savior
and I do my best not to get upset

They say God loves us all
and in our times of greatest need
he carries us through the storm
in which we would bleed

I believe that now

and I hope you do to
but if you ever feel overwhelmed
just remember to talk to one of the chosen few

I hope you could hear the vulnerability in there, and the NEW LIFE. From that point on, I had a sense of being pulled toward something, that there was something I was meant to do. Of course, I couldn't have described it so well at the time. Having come from such a dark place, it seemed only that my life had finally gained some direction, some hope.

A few weeks later my church youth group was given the opportunity to conduct the Sunday service. When I heard, I knew IMMEDIATELY I needed to share my experience of God's saving grace with the congregation. The question was how.

The youth decided the best plan was to follow the traditional order of service. Each person chose the element they wanted to do or lead. I was still thinking about a way to incorporate my story when I realized I was the only one LEFT to choose, and there was only one ELEMENT left. Guess which one – it was the sermon, of course. I remember thinking, "Oh no, not the sermon! But WAIT, that's it!" Sometimes the Spirit has to give us a good swift kick before we recognize an opportunity. Most of my talk was already written. It didn't take me long to realize that this was WHY I had WRITTEN The Chosen Few.

That was the first time I ever spoke in public, and I was so nervous I could hardly breathe. But it went better than I could have imagined. I was in tears, and so were many in the congregation. It was an incredible experience and one I will never forget.

Now in light of all that I've learned about preaching, that wasn't really much of a sermon at all. But afterwards, TWO different people came up to me and told me I would make a good pastor. TWO DIFFERENT people! I remember thinking, "Where did THAT come from? I was just talking about my CONVERSION experience. Here I am a brand new Christian and they're telling me to become a pastor? What could they possibly have seen in me to give them THAT impression?"

A couple years later, I was given ANOTHER opportunity to speak, this time at my high school baccalaureate. I was comforted by the fact that it was held at my home church, and many of my classmates and their families were members, so it was as if I were speaking to my home congregation again. Then, to my astonishment, people AGAIN came to tell me I would make a good pastor.

For lack of a better explanation, or one I could ACCEPT anyway, I dismissed the comments as simply meaning I was a good speaker. I was young and proud and thought I could never sacrifice myself to a life of service. I didn't know how ANYONE could stand the stress and the hours of THAT job.

But that nagging feeling that I was meant to DO something, something MORE, persisted. Any doubts I had disappeared when I took a religion class in college and learned about the concept of "God's call." It hit me like a freight train. I'd been called ever since the moment I became a Christian. It was that sense that I was being led towards something. It was what I had been fighting all those years. I had never been able to put my finger on it, but it had always been with me. I realized that God had been with me, guiding me, all along. All the choices I had made, all the opportunities I had been given, they all had been leading to this.

Later, I was blessed with one last opportunity to address my home congregation. I consulted with Pastor Phil and explained that because my church had been such an important part of my call, I felt they should know everything that had happened to me since I had last spoken to them. I wanted to tell them about my intentions to become a pastor. He thought it was a great idea. So once again I gave a sermon. The experience confirmed what I already knew. I was CALLED to be a pastor.

Afterwards, Pastor Phil had a surprise for me. Later that week, he asked me to meet him at the parish building, and the women of the church were quilting. But there was one woman who was doing something different – she was doing calligraphy. And Pastor Phil asked me, "Do you recognize that?"

And I looked closer, and she was writing my poem. They had it framed and presented it to me. I still have it hanging in my office.

And then Pastor Phil explained to me that every week since I had told my story that first time, all those years before, these woman had been praying for me, that I would become a pastor. And he said, “You do realize that once they started doing that, you had no choice.”

Now I tell you this, not because MY story is SPECIAL; I tell you because it's NOT. Most pastors will tell you a similar kind of story – how the call changed their life, how they resisted it, but God called them anyway.

I tell you this story, not because I'M special, but because YOU are. I hope you heard in my story that, EVERY step along the way, it was somebody like YOU who told me about the call, who made it real for me. God's call comes through people. Just like in the story from John's gospel, the call comes through people.

Frederick Buechner said, “The life I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and in turn another, until who knows where the trembling stops or in what far place my touch will be felt.”

THIS church has already produced three pastors that I know of. My home church now has its second member to become a pastor. In both cases, it's because people in the church CARED, and TOLD them that they were called.

What I've learned along the way is that EVERY ONE of us is called, to SHARE God's Word with another, to live out our faith. I wrote about the Chosen Few not knowing that I would become a pastor, and not knowing that the Chosen Few would be sitting right in front of me. YOU are the Chosen Few. YOU tell people about Jesus. YOU tell people about God's love. YOU are the Chosen Few. You are who I was writing about in the 10th grade.

So go and tell somebody to “Come and See.” Come and see what God is doing. Amen.