

## “The Call”

### I. Introduction. The Call.

Several years after beginning our ministry in Aiken, South Carolina, Peg and I went with a group of parishioners to see The Passion Play presented at the Atlanta Civic Center. It was a very well done musical presentation of the Passion that included a song titled “The Call.” The disciples sang this song together shortly after being called to follow Christ. The essence of the song is that when Jesus called them, they left everything in their lives behind and followed him. At that time they couldn’t have explained why. Yes, Jesus was magnetic, but it was more than that. Their response to Jesus’ call came from some place deep within them. The call that Jesus gave to them became a call that became alive within them. And they followed him one step at a time. Not always having the slightest idea about what was coming next, they followed him one step at a time.

### II. A New Jesus.

The Jesus these disciples responded to in today’s Gospel reading was a new man. Jesus had just completed his 40 days of temptation in the barren and wild Judean desert. Friday evening at the diocesan convention a visiting clergy person from our companion diocese South Dakota described how young people in his Lakota tribe go alone into a sacred space for days and days in a vision quest; similarly, Jesus had gone alone into the desert to gain new insight about his life’s mission. He struggled and prevailed over the temptation of self-advancement, power, and greed, and he was only then ready to answer God’s call to him. But he needed help; he needed companionship; he needed followers he could trust and train and one day turn his ministry over to. Just as each generation of us has needed to enlist and help prepare other Christians who would one day carry on the work of Christ in their own time. Here then is where it all begins for Peter and Andrew and James and John. They were fishermen, working at their trade, when Jesus came by and told them “Follow me and I will make you fishers of people.” For some of us that is a familiar Sunday School song, learned many years ago – a song that even had hand motions. We were to pretend that we had a long fishing pole in our hands, and we were to cast out the line as far into the water as we could, all the while singing: “I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men, I will make you fishers of men if you follow me.”

Then we were to reel that fish in – the fish would struggle and fight back, but we would keep reeling and singing all the time. In spite of the great struggle, we finally caught the fish, with a big smile on our face. Never mind how much that fishhook had hurt the new convert, we had won a fish for Jesus!

### III. Fishing for Jesus.

My own understanding of what it means to “fish for people” has gone through many changes since those early days in Sunday School. I have come to understand that our calls to follow Christ are not always heard in the same way. I have come to understand that as we are called to fish for people, we are called to offer Christ’s love to them, and to live out that love in how we care for them. I have come to a deeper and deeper understanding as my life has gone on that Christ calls us to offer reconciliation and healing to the world around us. We can sometimes feel overwhelmed by the task of serving as agents of reconciliation in this world. We come to quickly understand how many people around us are broken, how many people search for God but have trouble finding him, and how many people need, deeply need, to experience the personal love of God that is at the very heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

### IV. Fishing for Jesus. Revisited.

As God equips us to be increasingly effective agents of reconciliation, of healing, and teaching, and baptizing, and casting out demons such as addictions that weighs others down, we need to remember two things. A) First, we only have to respond to God’s call, to Christ’s call, one step at a time. God will only ask us to do what we are able to do at any given time. Let me share an example of how this works. In a men’s study group that I facilitated several years ago, we read the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. He used a series of gospel-based focused meditations as an aid to knowing and following Jesus Christ more fully. I had first read the Exercises as an assignment for a semester-long course at Yale. One Spiritual Exercise I read asked the reader to consider that Simon and the other disciples had been provided three different opportunities to follow Christ. After each opportunity they could choose to move to another level of commitment. They had not had to make their choices about discipleship all at once. It hit me like the proverbial ton of bricks – that’s how God had been working in calling me to the ministry -- Allowing me multiple points of decision in my process of becoming a priest.

These multiple points included, first, deciding to attend an Episcopal Church when initially invited by a priest I worked with in the mid-1980s. He knew I had not been attending any church regularly. A second opportunity was responding to the invitation to participate in the year-long catechumenal process provided by that parish; a third opportunity was to respond to my sense of call into the ordination process. I believe that God knew me so much better than I knew myself. God structured the process of my call to discipleship in a way that I could follow, step by step. My job has been to say yes at each juncture.

Secondly, Christ's constancy is our secure base. Although we grow and change as we respond to Christ's call to us, Christ does not. This weekend at our Diocesan Convention, Bishop von Rosenberg gave his annual address. The Bishop recognized that we are experiencing rapid study change in the world around us – in our personal lives, in our church, our country, and globally in the whole world. At times these transitions seem to be speeding up and challenging us in many ways. At the same time, said our Bishop, "There are realities, beliefs, and matters of faith that most assuredly do not change, in spite of claims to the contrary by detractors and nay-sayers in our time. At every ordination of a deacon, a priest, and a bishop in The Episcopal church, that candidate makes a public statement of affirmation – and then publicly signs that statement – that we 'do believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, and to contain all things necessary to salvation' (BCP, pp. 513, 526, and 538)." The Bishop continued: "The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds of the historic church continue to be affirmed regularly in public worship, as statements of our faith today. The Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – continues to be worshipped, in three persons, as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier, as God has been worshipped through time. The Gospel we preach conveys the faith once received by means of the life and witness of the blessed apostles, saints, and martyrs in ages past. And, my brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, this is not a new Gospel. The times are new, every day. The transition that confront us – in these new times – in the world and in the church, continue to challenge us . . . and, sometimes, to perplex us. But make no mistake about this. The Gospel we preach is not a new Gospel. By means of this Gospel, we continue to be caretakers, stewards, of the faith which is in Jesus Christ. And, as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews affirms, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (13:8)."

#### V. Conclusion: Our Call.

Every Christian receives a call to ministry and every call is supported by the gifts that God gives us. The vitality of our Christian faith is directly correlated with, first, how willing we are to hear God's call, and, secondly, how willing we are to act upon it – step by step. The good news is that God's calls are given to us when we have the capacity to discern them and that Christ will teach us how to live them out, one faithful step at a time. And, finally, and most importantly, our Christ remains constant. Christ will remain our secure base, guiding us, teaching us, walking beside us every step of the way, the same yesterday and today and forever. Thanks be to God. *Amen.*