

### **Ephesians 4.1-2, 11-12 (NRSV)**

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,<sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love ... the gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*

### The Worth of a Call

For obvious reasons, I've been thinking a lot about the concept of a call and what I'm doing here in this pulpit today. It certainly doesn't work like a phone call. I didn't answer some celestial ring tone and have a powerful voice on the other end tell me: "Though shalt go into the Valley of Temecula. Though shalt preach about this phone call." None the less I feel confident I am in the right place. Coming here today is the culmination of a lot of discernment and prayer, both on my part and on yours. Today, I want to share with you a key aspect of my faith journey, one of my earliest and most formative, when I really started to come into and own my faith.

My freshman year in high school, I was a relatively typical student in a success-driven, over-programmed and competitive school. I had marching band in the morning, water polo in the afternoons and a robust academic course load in between. I remember being disappointed about not getting into Geometry freshman year because I'd have to take summer school if I wanted to get to Calculus by senior year. To this date I've managed to live a relatively fulfilling life without ever taking Calculus, but in that context it seemed crucially important.

But one afternoon at water polo practice a bad throw changed all of that. I was struck by a stray ball and initially thought nothing of it. By the end of the day I was in the hospital with unexplainable muscle spasms in my face. I didn't have a concussion, or any visible brain damage, but my eyes kept blinking rapidly and uncontrollably.

The next four years were a long, difficult and complicated struggle with a rare muscle movement disorder which took years to diagnose and treat properly. The most common problem was the facial spasms that open and shut my eyes, impairing my vision and my ability to read, watch TV or work on a computer. If you rapidly blink your left eye, then your right, you have a rough simulation of how I spent the majority of my conscious hours. Sometimes the spasms would also occur in my arms making activities like writing and even eating new challenges. The world I was in before – the one where I worried about starting in the next water polo game or whether I could take Calculus before I graduated – came tumbling down.

But it was in the ruins of that life that I really began to understand and own my faith. In the darkest times – when I felt trapped in a dysfunctional body that may never heal – I knew there was something within me that could never be broken, that could never be taken away. It was then that I began to understand my soul and that I was connected to something divine, something transcendent.

One of the many mysteries of our faith is that it is often our times of trials and tribulations when we come closer to God. It is counter-intuitive – if you are beset by misfortune, by the loss of a loved one or a terrible disease, it is easy to blame God. But the more I listen to people's faith

stories, and the more I reflect upon my own, time and time again I see a pattern. It is when we realize the fleetingness and fragility of the things of this world that we are most ready to seek God's Kingdom. It is when we realize that our bodies are mortal and vulnerable that we look within to discover a soul that is eternal and divine.

There were times when I would literally just sit in a dark room alone, and while I felt like the spasms were shutting me off from normal interaction with the outside world, it was during these times that I learned to look within myself and talk to God. And while it would not be until some time later that I felt the call to become a pastor, I feel that it was during that struggle in my life when the seeds were first planted.

My senior year in high school I was put on a medication that effectively managed my muscle movement disorder and allowed me, for the most part, to function normally. The two things that were most difficult before my medication – reading and writing – became my passion in college. I majored in English and philosophy and eventually became the Editor in Chief of the university newspaper. Through my educational and professional development, I've carried with me the perspective of my disability. I have a profound gratitude for achievements, while also being reminded not make idols of them; I know how quickly and easily your entire world can change.

Graduating college, I knew that I wanted to do something in line with my faith convictions and beliefs, something that served justice and brought me closer to Christ. But initially I didn't recognize ordained ministry as the place where that would happen. I looked into teaching and

journalism, two obvious career moves for an English major and editor of a university newspaper.

For some reason, I thought that I wasn't the "right" kind of Christian to be a minister. Even though I was raised in a positive faith environment, and even though my parents and church leaders gave me a lot of intellectual and spiritual freedom, part of me still bought into the dominant cultural narrative about who and what Christians were "supposed" to be. I grew up Christian and knew first-hand the diversity of opinions and theologies in the pews, and I knew that Christianity was not a monolithic tradition with one "right" set of answers, yet I think there was a part of me that falsely believed I wasn't a "true" Christian. True Christians don't dig post-modernism or listen to awesome heavy metal like Iron Maiden.

I suspect many of you here can relate to that feeling. I'm sure members of this church have been told they aren't "real" Christians because this is a community that welcomes gays and lesbians, and blesses same-sex unions. I'm sure some of you have been told that you aren't "real" Christians because this is a community that serves an open communion with no preconditions. I'm sure some of you have been told you aren't "real" Christians because this is a community that values pluralism and allows people from all beliefs to participate fully in the community.

This myth of "real" Christianity is one that is pervasive and destructive to our society, and thankfully there are churches like this one that undermine and disprove a lot of the social preconceptions of Christianity. I cannot tell you how many people are hungry for a spiritual

home like this one, how many people have been alienated from their spiritual communities because there are forces trying to authorize a narrow conception of Christianity. One of my best friends is a neurobiologist at UC Irvine, and felt as though he had to choose between intellectual honesty and his church. About a week ago I showed him around Murrieta and we stopped by the community house. He was floored when he was reading the “8 points of Progressive Christianity” and turned to me and said, “Where was this when I was growing up?” My friend is one of many who could have used a spiritual home like this one, and one of the reasons I want to serve this church, and help it grow and establish itself here in Murrieta is because I see it as uniquely capable of serving those who could otherwise be alienated from their faith. This church tells its members and its guests every Sunday that they don’t have to be the “right” kind of Christian to worship here.

Fortunately the theology of churches like this one, and the mentorship of a couple good pastors, helped me realize that being atypical was an asset to my ministry, not a disqualifier. And while ordained pastor is a specific manifestation of ministry, we all have a call in this life, and the work of ministry is too important – and too rewarding – to be left to professionals.

I chose today’s scripture in part because I see it as a Biblical charge to me specifically, that if voted in today to live a life that is worthy of the trust and the expectations you will have placed in me. But on a deeper level, I chose this passage because I think it is an important plea to every Christian and captures what it is we should be doing together as a community. Churches should be feeding and equipping their members to

do the work of ministry, and help each other live into our life's calling. I am just getting to know this congregation but already I see some of the many spiritual gifts present here – whether it's a good sense of humor, a compassionate ear, an encouraging voice, a stunning musical talent or intellectual curiosity and enthusiasm. It is my great hope to provide additional spiritual leadership here at the United Church of the Valley, and to foster the gifts of others, always striving to create a church culture where people recognize the divinity that dwells within them and the relationship they have with God.

This is largely because I do not think a call is not something unique to ordained ministry. We all have a call in life, and together we make up the body of Christ at work in the world. In both the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ traditions we take the priesthood of all believers very seriously. So seriously, in fact, that there will be a vote after worship today, a vote that decides whether I will be your next pastor. This pastorate, then, will not be the product of a diocese or a hierarchy, but a democracy of faithful believers making decisions together. Your authority to do this flows from our mutual belief that the power and work of the church should be the joy and responsibility of all. For we are all called to discipleship in Christ, we are all called to love our neighbors and we are all given spiritual gifts for that call. I believe that I have the gifts to be the next pastor here in the United Church of the Valley, and wholeheartedly believe all of you are equipped to decide if this is a mutual call. I'm not going to lie – the search and call process for ordained ministry is nerve-racking, and so is having the direction of my ministry

decided today in an up-down vote. But I have faith that regardless the outcome, it will be Spirit-driven and the products of your gifts.

While we should never overlook our flaws, we should also refuse to underestimate what we are capable of as a community and the holiness that is made available to us through God. About a year ago I took a preaching course and had a Pentecostal classmate. At the end of his first sermon, he asked, “Do the saints say ‘Amen’?” It took me as second to realize he was talking to the class. I’m an ok guy but saint is a stretch. Of course, in his tradition “the saints” doesn’t refer to the Catholic saints but rather the everyday people in the pews. When you hear “saint” in this passage, I want to encourage you to hear it more like a Pentecostal than a Catholic. Don’t see a mediator of prayers or a model of piety, but rather a regular person with a good heart and the desire to live a holy life. In fact, the Greek word for saint is literally “Holy ones.” Each one of us, by virtue of being a part of God’s creation, from the smallest child in this room to the greatest elder, are spiritual beings with a soul that transcends this world and spiritual gifts that can be applied in the service of God and neighbor. And while “saint” may seem lofty or flattering, we should acknowledge that there is holiness in all of us and that we are indeed capable of living a life worthy of our call.

Do the saints say Amen?

AMEN.