

What Does it Mean to Follow Him?

January 14, 2024. Second Sunday after the Epiphany. Year B

Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa

Texts: 1 Samuel 3:1-20; Psalm 139:1-5,12-17; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20;
John 1:43-51

Good morning, Incarnation! It's good to be back with you, and especially so today as your deacon!

Have you noticed that the lectionary readings for today are all about "call." God calls Samuel's name in the middle of the night. Philip comes to Nathaniel, calling him to go and meet Jesus; the Psalmist writes about being called before he was even born; it's enough to make one stop and consider one's OWN call.

So... I have been reflecting on my 13-year journey to the diaconate. It started back in 2011... Actually no...wait a minute - the journey began in September 1962, the day I was born. My mother will tell you that as she held me for the first time in the hospital and looked into my eyes, she knew in her heart that I was going to do something special for Christ. I'm sure in her mind, that "something special" somehow involved ministering in the church of my origin, the church of Christ and not the Episcopal Church, but hey... once I was asked to leave the church of Christ for being gay, I never looked back. And I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that life and love and acceptance happen without exception ... in **this** place.

One usually can achieve ordination in about two years, but I took the "nontraditional" route, which took four. My journey went like this: First, a regional discernment group was formed to see if I genuinely had a call to ministry. Recommendations were made to the Commission on Ministry (COM) about whether I was welcome to move forward. A formation plan was then explicitly formulated for me, which included Hebrew and New Testament Scripture studies, Theology and the Tradition of the Church, Diakonia and the Diaconate, Human Awareness and Understanding, Spiritual Development and Discipline, Prayer Book

studies, Ministry Development, Christian Ethics, Church History and Canon Law, and finally, Asset-Based Community-Led Development. Then, I spent a year using it in practical training, commonly called field education.

Then, a little over a week ago, on Saturday, January 6th, God willed, and the people consented, and I was ordained a deacon. I don't know if you've actually read the Examination (or charge) that a deacon takes at ordination, but here you go: You are to study the Holy Scriptures, to seek nourishment from them, and to model your life upon them. You are to make Christ and his redemptive love known, by your word and example, to those among whom you live, and work, and worship. You are to interpret to the Church the needs, concerns, and hopes of the world. And there are a few other things that deacons are charged to do, but that's the gist of it.

Nathanael asks Philip, Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Then Philip said, "Come and see."

So, the gospel passage we read is also about movement! One cannot sit idly by and answer a call. It's about being shaken out of one's complacency to go and to see! To check out what's happening!

Martin Luther King, whose birthday we celebrate tomorrow, answered a call into some really, really hard work which ultimately cost him his life. He and his family lived in constant danger: their home was dynamited, he was almost fatally stabbed, and death threats harassed him. He was beaten and jailed over 30 times. Martin Luther King is known for his non-violent actions and leadership; through it all, he was sustained by a deep faith in God and a call to serve others.

Then there's our denomination's own, The Reverend Pauli Murry, who, after college, saw injustice and answered a call as a civil rights activist, author, and lawyer. Murry was the first Black person to earn a Doctor of the Science of Law degree from Yale and the first Black woman to be ordained an Episcopal priest. As a lawyer, Murray used her career to

advocate for racial justice, and she laid the groundwork by encouraging feminist lawyers to move away from seeking special protections for women and instead argue for equal rights. Ruth Bader Ginsburg credited Murray with teaching her how appealing to the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment could be an effective method to fight sex discrimination. I bet you didn't know that more than a decade before Rosa Parks sparked a boycott, Murry was arrested for integrating an interstate bus.

And, like Dr. King, Pauli Murry, and scores of other saints who have gone on before us, once one sees injustices and disparity, one can not sit idly by and do nothing. One must take courage, rise, and act! Very much like we did in 2013 with the outrage surrounding the killings of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, and like we continue to do today with over 400 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in state legislatures nationwide, nearly half of which target transgender and non-binary people specifically.

As I reflected on my call to ordained ministry, I wondered what if ... what if God calls **all of us** into ministry by way of our Baptismal Covenant and then has to make do with the ones who say "yes." If I didn't become a deacon, did it mean that I said no to God? That couldn't be right. But in a broader sense, could we assume that God is calling every person in the world to God's kingdom, and to some kind of service and then waiting to see what their response will be?

I wonder, today, where are you in relation to answering your call?

And maybe God does call everyone and then waits for us to say yes! "Yes people" are in the church. We are the ones who have been called out of the world and into God's kingdom, and somewhere along the way, we had to say yes to God. God is not going to force us into church, or into God's kingdom or into God's service or even into heaven.

God calls, and God waits. God calls, and God waits.

At this point, you may be wondering what it was like for me to answer my call? Well, most of my 13-year journey was spent discerning my call, and I did so with hundreds of meetings with a spiritual director, actually two spiritual directors, because I wore one out, bless her heart! The last few months I spent discerning whether my call was to be a priest or a deacon and trusting the discernment process, it became apparent to me that I was called to be a deacon.

Now, indeed, God isn't calling every person in the world to "full-time vocational ordained ministry," as we call it. The pulpit would get a little crowded if all of you were up here and no one was out there.

Noted 20th-century lay theologian Verna Dozier explains in her book, *The Dream of God*, that God's dream for us is to follow Jesus and his teachings with all of our heart, mind, and strength. However, the institutional church has missed a significant mark by not recognizing and empowering its lay leadership. In her book, Dozier explained that the baptized community has enough power to change the world and that the dream of God is fully realized in each of you and becomes manifest in your call as lay leaders here at Incarnation. Diana Ardly would love to talk with you about ways to participate in the Altar Guild or be a Eucharistic Minister and Acolyte (can you bake communion bread?). Daphne would love to talk with you about becoming a children's chapel volunteer or how you can work with the Spiritual Formation Committee or on the Liturgy Committee. Chat with Jun Kim about exercising your talent to be a choir member. There are many ways to answer your call at Incarnation, and it's important to know that your call may change over time as your faith grows and deepens and your faith journey shifts. Dozier asks an important question, "What difference does it make that you believe? Does the world come nearer to the dream of God because of WHAT you believe?"

Some of us hear God's call and say yes. Some of us keep listening and find that God keeps calling, always calling us into deeper relationships and more faithful service and always waiting to see if we will say yes or no. If you can tune your radio to that frequency, I think you will hear

him calling you as he called Samuel, and if you are very brave, you can answer as Samuel did, “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

For together, today, we stand at the molten edge of what God is doing in the world.

Amen.