

Sermon: January 15, 2017 John 1: 29-42
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Call – our calling – being called.

When I think of being called by God, my mind immediately goes to the classic, individual call stories of the Hebrew Scriptures: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Samuel, each called to speak God's corrective word to the powers-that-be. Next I think Mary, called to give herself body-and-soul to bear and nurture the child of promise. Much later, the conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus was a calling that set the foundation for the Church in the gentile world. Each of these call stories is a deeply personal moment, in which someone was called not just to do something new, but to be something new.

The next two Sundays, we will be in the presence of call stories that are communal rather than individual. This week and next we will hear of the team-building call of Jesus to one disciple after another, assembling the group that would give the good news of Jesus a variety of voices and personalities. It's unfortunate that the patriarchy of the ages has only given us the call stories of the twelve males closest to Jesus, for the gospels and, particularly, the book of Acts make clear that there was an inner circle of women who were just as crucial to the mission as the twelve named apostles, so as we envision the first followers we can faithfully add some female faces to the group.

Our bulletin cover today may or may not have been produced with this scripture in mind, but I imagine this image aside the image of Jesus and the first followers down on the beach. The stories of Jesus and the disciples 2000 years ago are formative for our walk together as Christians, but not just in a way-back-then, ancestral way. The call of Christ, the journey with Christ, the embodiment of the reconciling love of Christ, are things that get replayed each day in every community. Much as I love the stories back in Galilee, the call to discipleship is spoken to those of us in parkas and boots, as well as those in tunics and sandals.

In preparing today's service I found that one of the hymns, "Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?" by John Bell, and the Iona community in Scotland, covered pretty much all the points that I would want to make about today's passage from the 1st chapter of John, so I'll be bringing them on-screen a verse at a time as we seek to hear Christ's voice calling us as he called his first followers so long ago:

2. Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare, should your life attract or scare?

Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

When Jesus approached his first disciples, Andrew and an unnamed associate, they were not what you would call "free agents." They were already committed as disciples of John the Baptist, so we can assume that they had already done the soul work of letting go of worldly attachments, and committing themselves to the God-forwarding goals of the baptizer. In order to follow Jesus, then, they had to change course, alter their commitments, perhaps even apologize to people who were counting on them.

When I hear this as an individual, it speaks of the tradition in pretty much all religions, of non-attachment: not getting too attached to your possessions, or your opinions, or your wisdom, or even your relationships. Doubly so with these disciples who are switching from John to Jesus – they really had to be open to change. And that is an important first step in really stepping into the footsteps of Christ: getting over myself.

This morning, though, we consider these words not just as individuals, but as members together of the body of Christ. It is just as important for a congregation to do this deep self-examination as it is for an individual, to make sure that we aren't so tied up in our attachments that we are unable to move freely as Christ would have us move. It is easy for any congregation, without even realizing it, to start worshipping its own identity – or its style of music – or its building – or its scholarly traditions – and getting a sort of spiritual tinnitus, so overwhelmed by the sounds in its head that it no longer hears the directions that Jesus is shouting. Thankfully, I see very, very little of this in this congregation, but it's important, especially at the beginning of a new year, to look in the mirror and say, "are we who Christ would have us be?"

One of the most important qualities for the Church in the northern hemisphere finding a future will be to remain nimble, frequently adjusting course to respond to the needs of the day. Last year, as we celebrated the 125th anniversary of this Church, I came to understand and value the way that this

congregation *has* adapted over the years, changing as the community around us has changed. Back in the first days of the mines, this was a very rough-and-tumble, male-dominated town, and providing activities other than drinking was job one. In some ways, I wonder if we're back at that point again, at least in our relationship with the youth and young adults in our town. As our friend Camille put it, if you're a young adult in the Bow Valley and not into hiking/climbing/skiing or the bar scene, it can be pretty isolating – and from her investigations, Canmore had no clear “safe space” for the LGBTQ community to gather. In this coming year, you can expect this congregation to be involved in both of those ventures: seeking community partners to understand and diversify the opportunities for youth and young adults, starting with a meeting this week, and revisiting our role in truly welcoming the LGBTQ community.

A true paradox for any community of faith is raised by the final line of this stanza: “Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?” and continued in the 4th stanza:

4. Will you love the “you” you hide if I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

We are called to let go of our attachments, to let go of our ego needs, to be more concerned about being faithful than being right... and yet at the same time, are called to recognize and mobilize the power that has been given us, to own the beauty that God places in each person, even me. Each person in this room has the potential to be the answer to someone else's prayer. Our actions are not just “similar to” the way that Christ expressed love for people; our actions are the means by which Christ's love is known. Each of us, and all of us together, can be the fulfillment of God's loving will. It can be as simple as an unexpected reach-out to someone you haven't seen for a while, or as thorough-going as throwing your weight behind a social issue that has been tugging on your sleeve for a while, and all of it is connected to our faith in Jesus Christ, the source of life made new.

Lynne Lee, a “Christian Life Coach” in the UK, says “Your identity doesn't depend on something you do or have done. Your true identity is who God says you are. God's opinion is the one that counts. Accept what God says about you, agree that it is true of you and become the spiritual person you are. Understanding who you are in Christ will give you a strong foundation to build your life on. Knowing who you are in Jesus is the key to... a life lived on purpose.” God knows my heart as a person, God knows our heart as a congregation, and encourages us to embrace that goodness and work from there. In the same way that Jesus could see right into the heart of someone like Simon, saying on first meeting, “from now on you will be known as the rock,” each of us has God-given strengths that need to get un-hidden and put to use. They might be skills we have rarely used or they might be skills or attributes we use all the time but never thought of putting to use in the context of Church, but they are there, and they are needed. (Please note subliminal message on-screen of when & how to offer these hidden talents: Annual Meeting, March 5th after worship).

Our next stanza:

1. Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown, will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Whenever we meet up with Jesus as he is assessing and assembling his discipleship group, the uncertainty of it all is palpable. Whether they are leaving their connection to John the Baptist, as with today's scripture, or leaving their fishing nets behind, as we will hear next Sunday, there is a leaving behind of the known and a giant stride of faith into the unknown. It may involve making big changes or it may simply mean finding a new spirit of welcoming the new events and new people that will enter our lives. What is certain, is that it will change us.

It is easiest for me, simple and predictable, when I keep my distance, or stay focused on hearth and home, or mind my own business. Same thing goes for a congregation. Things get a lot less predictable when our plans are open to be changed by the needs of the world, and when we truly open the doors and say “welcome in, you have a full say in this place.” Less predictable, but more energetic and more real. For those of you who are reasonably new here, I hope that you are experiencing welcome: we want you here and are open to whatever changes you might bring with you. As we together orient ourselves toward Christ's call of radical inclusion and costly love, we will all be changed.

While the changes required of an open community of faith may be challenging, the line here that is likely to cause even more discomfort, is “will you let my name be known” which ties in with the third stanza:

3. Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
 Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
 Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

Letting the name of Christ be known in our actions and our words... “admitting” to what Christ means to us and what we mean to Christ. I am saddened that these words describe our reality, but they do. Partly deserved, partly undeserved, the Church doesn’t have the greatest reputation out there these days. Many of my Facebook friends, or more often friends-of-friends, equate “Christian” with “unbearable, deluded, judgmental lunatic.” And for that reason, when we do wade in and act with love in the name of Christ, that needs to be made explicit. For liberation, and healing and wholeness, and free discussion of science and spirit, are all direct expressions of who Jesus is in us. That would come as a huge surprise to a great many people, who are hearing only the very loud voices that are so beloved by the media, who equate their religious commitments with punishing the prisoner, forbidding eyes gone blind from seeing anything new, and judging the leper for her lot in life.

Last week we spoke of the curiosity, courage and faith needed for the journey of faith, and by admitting to our Christ-connection we might possibly pique the curiosity of those around us. In addition to Andrew’s outright eagerness to go and bring his brother to Jesus – the first recorded evangelism amongst the disciples - perhaps my favourite interaction in today’s gospel reading is when Jesus asks the new disciples what they are looking for, they wonder aloud, “where do you live” and Jesus responds, “come and see.” Come and see – see for yourself – feel with your own heart – discern with your own mind – act with your own life. In the very skeptical surroundings of 2017 Canada, we need to be presenting a committed, sensible, reasonable, broadly-loving version of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Some of those connections were built, I believe, in the establishment of the Bow Valley Syria Refugee Project in November of 2015, which has forged such deep connections between Church and community and has successfully brought six wonderful people to Canmore. In case you’ve not heard, we have submitted a second application, for a family of three to also come here. We do so as Canadians who believe certain things about our responsibility to people of all nations, and we do so as Christians who cannot sit in silence when there is such need. We didn’t set out on this path in order to “raise our profile” in the community but I do believe that having this community group connected to a Church does bring honour to the name of Christ – and that is always a good thing. With so many terrible and deluded things done in our world under the auspices of “faithful obedience to God” it is important to counter that with acts of openness, and kindness, and invitation.

So far, we’ve explored the first four stanzas of John Bell’s hymn, and all four of them are written in first-person, as a call from Jesus to us. In the fifth and final stanza, we take what we have heard as Christ’s invitation to us, and respond:

5. Christ, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
 Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
 In your company I’ll go where your love and footsteps show.
 Thus I’ll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

May these words describe our response as a congregation in this coming year, a decision for discipleship in reply to the inviting grace of Jesus Christ. And now, that we’ve spent time with this hymn, it’s time to sing it! Voices United 567, “Will you come and follow me?”

References cited:

Lee, Lynne. <http://www.christianlifecoaching.co.uk/who-you-are-in-Christ.html>

Bell, John. “Will you come and follow me” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o469PRLdbHU> and Voices United #567.

See also: Stoffregen, Brian. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/john1x29.htm>