

This past Monday and Tuesday, I spent a lovely 24 hours along the shores of Lake Wapogasset in Amerly, Wisconsin with a wonderful group of folks from the St Paul Area Synod.

This retreat at Camp Wapo was for folks involved in the Synod's First Call Theological Education Program, a program designed to support new pastors in their first three years of pastoral ministry. I am honored to have been asked by the Synod to serve as a mentor, and my work with the six First Call pastors that I am mentoring has been engaging and delightful.

At the close of our time together, three pastors were finishing their 3 years, and so we held a commissioning for them. One middle-aged woman, and two younger women. Each of them spoke about what they had learned in their time in the program and each of them reflected on their call to ministry.

Their stories were all unique, but their senses of call were all unmistakable. They are gifted pastors, greatly loved by their congregations, and are using their God-given gifts to do God's kingdom work in their congregations and communities.

While these three women all experienced a call into pastoral Ministry, those of us who experience a call to ministry, are not any more special than anyone else who has also experienced God's call on their life.

As you may know, Martin Luther himself was the first to broaden the sense of vocational calling to be expanded from clergy only  
to be a calling for all God's children to use their giftedness  
wherever that may be.

Theologically speaking, your callings to whatever your professions and responsibilities are or have been, are just as God-given as my fellow pastors and my calling into Christian Ministry. There are needs in the world that only you can meet.

In your work, or in your retirement, God calls each of us, to do the work of God to grow God's reign on earth.

If you think back to your calling into your line of work, and your call to follow Christ.

Perhaps some of you had an organic little-by-little figuring out of what it is that you wanted to do, like my experience.

But maybe some of you had sudden "aha" experiences where  
in an instant, you knew you were called to your vocation.

Jesus Has already called Philip, and Philip has found Nathanael and told him that he has found the one foretold in the sections of the Hebrew Bible called the law or Torah and the Prophets.

The Messiah, says Philip is Jesus, Son of Joseph from Nazareth.

Seemingly without pause, in the most skeptical and prejudicial way possible, Nathanael says he is dubious because,

can anything good come out of Nazareth?

Nazareth was a small, out-of-the-way, nondescript village of a couple hundred people. How could anyone from this town in the sticks be of any significance?

We've all been there. Learning about the origins of someone or perhaps some thing, and thought this can't be possible

because those kinds of people, people from those places, are suspect.

Sometime after takeoff, on a flight from Detroit to Minneapolis, a man two rows in front of Tamika Cross, a black woman,

suddenly became unresponsive and flight attendants called for help.

Cross, a physician, immediately flagged down one of the crew members, offering to treat the man.

She got a response she wasn't prepared for.

"Oh no, sweetie, put [your] hand down," the flight attendant said.

"We are looking for actual physicians or nurses or some type of medical personnel, we don't have time to talk to you."

At that point a white male came up and told the crew he was a physician as well. The flight attendant sent Dr. Cross back to her seat, saying the man had his "credentials," only to return to her later for advice on how to treat the passenger's low blood pressure. The passenger eventually regained consciousness and was answering questions.

The reason behind the flight attendant's apparent skepticism? Seems obvious that it is because Dr. Cross is a black woman.

Dr. Cross's story calls up other incidents in which black professionals claim to have been racially profiled. Sen. Tim Scott (R-S.C.) was questioned by police because of his race. And famous Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. was arrested by a white police officer on the porch of his own home in Cambridge, Mass.

We bear the consequences to this day of the nation's original sin of slavery.

Too often we consciously and unconsciously discriminate with racial stereotypes, to this day.

What preconceived notions do we have

that might prevent us from seeing the work of God?

Could professional medical care come from a black woman?

Can anything good come from Nazareth?

In the face of Nathanael's prejudice, Philip is undeterred. "Come and see."

All you need is just one look.

You will see, and you will understand.

This one is the Messiah.

And so Nathanael shows up, and Jesus says:

"Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!"

This may seem to be a strange comment coming from Jesus, but it is a clever compliment.

And here's why:

The Israelites are the "children of Israel." Israel of course, is the name that Jacob is given after wrestling with God. And the meaning of Jacob's name? Usurper, duplicitous, deceiver.

So Jesus is complementing Nathanael

with an allusion to the founder's namesake.

Seems a bit odd that Jesus, in effect, compliments Nathanael on just speaking his mind. On Nathanael calling things as he sees them about folks from Nazareth.

You know as well as I that there is no shortage of people who "call them like they see them." And people who have their minds made up.

But here is the thing about Nathanael.

*He didn't have his mind made up.*

Nathanael was willing to change his mind.

And change his mind he did, from "nothing good comes out of Nazareth," to

*'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'*

This is the season of **Epiphany**, the revelation of the light of God. And so we note this connection to Jacob, who, as Jesus describes, sees "angels ascending and descending" when he dreamt of the stairway to heaven.

And further, after wrestling with the supernatural being, Jacob says, "I have seen the face of God."

And so too, does Nathanael encounter God.

We don't hear much about Nathaneal after this call story. We don't know what his life was like following Jesus.

In our OT reading this morning, we hear another call story, the familiar call of young Samuel. Samuel is an apprentice under Priest Eli. Young Samuel's call comes through the very voice of God, whom Samuel mistakes for Eli. Eventually, Eli points him in the right direction, and Samuel, steps right up:

“Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

And boy, does the Lord speak!

The Lord tells young Samuel, who is destined to be a great prophet in Israel, something that the Lord is “about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.”

Namely, that he is about to “punish Eli's house forever for not restraining his sons who were blaspheming God, and that no sacrifice or offering can make amends for their iniquity. Ouch!

The Lord called Samuel.

The Lord called Samuel to do a hard thing.

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This is Martin Luther King Jr. holiday weekend. King is celebrated for the work he did in his short 39 years on behalf of racial justice. He understood his call from God to do a hard thing too.

He prophetically called out the injustice in our nation in the formal and informal discrimination against black folks, and he condemned the war in Vietnam.

This angered white folks such that MLK had a disapproval rating which is quite shocking for someone who has a national holiday celebrated for him. Any guesses as to what his DISAPPROVAL rating was at the time of his death?

It was 75%.<sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther King's call,

like that of Eli's,

was to do hard things:

to confront a nation with its systemic, racist, unjust oppression of minority, BIPOC people.

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<sup>1</sup> "Why Martin Luther King Had a 75 Percent Disapproval Rating in the Year of His Death. His Crusade to Confront Economic Injustice and the Vietnam War Angered Whites, While Younger Black Activists Had Lost Patience With His Nonviolent Tactics." By James C. Cobb | April 4, 2018 According to an early 1968 Harris Poll, the man whose half-century of martyrdom we celebrate this week died with a public disapproval rating of nearly 75 percent, a figure shocking in its own day and still striking even in today's highly polarized political climate."

King was called by God, called to do something hard, something unpopular—speaking out against injustice,  
because God’s heart is always for justice.

The last book Martin Luther King Jr. wrote before his assassination posed a question as relevant in 1967 as it is in 2024. The title was this:

*Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*  
Chaos or Community. It’s a stark contrast. .

When so many are working to cause chaos,  
and division,  
and discrimination,  
I think Martin Luther King Jr is right, that we need to work for community.

Think about the voices you listen to—are they calling for chaos, or community? God is always on the side of community, not the side of chaos or division, or grievance, or hate.

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All this is to say that when God calls us, it’s very possible he calls us to do hard things. This seems particularly relevant in our culture today. To love and not hate, to welcome, not exclude, to seek community, not chaos.

Go this week, knowing your call,  
combat chaos,  
and work for community,  
trusting God to help you.

For this is the call of the Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.