

TEXT: John 1:43-51  
THEME: Finding and following a mission fulfills us  
SUBJECT: Calling  
TITLE: Follow Me

Second Sunday after Epiphany  
17 January 2021  
Messiah Moravian  
Jerry Harris

Graham Greene told his biographer, Norman Sherry, that the novel *The End of the Affair* had its beginning in a quote from Baron von Hugel, “If we will not own it as a means, it will grip us as our End.” Sherry felt that Greene was approaching Cardinal Newman’s notion that God has a special call for each of us, though we may not know what that mission is, or the way God may approach us.

Greene read the relevant passage to Sherry and his reading was filled with unusual emotion. Bendrix, the lead character, speaks: “For if this God exists, I thought, and even if you—with your lusts and your adulteries and the timid lies you used to tell—can change like this, we could all be saints by leaping as you leapt, by shutting the eyes and leaping once and for all: if you are a saint, it’s not so difficult to be a saint.”

Sherry was deeply moved as he listened to Greene read, partly because Greene himself was moved. Sherry felt that in his private moments Greene, often in perplexity, must wrestle with the problem of mission. Bendrix, perhaps giving voice to Greene’s own resistance, speaks of foiling God’s plan: “I’ll rob Him of what he wants in me.”

If we do not follow the call that is ours, whether out of fear or out of laziness, it will eat away at us. The calling is a gift we cannot return or discard. “If you have ever had the vision of God,” Macy Halford writes, “you may try as you like to be satisfied on a lower level, but God will never let you.”

Refusing a call, as Jonah did, can end in a psychological vice with God tightening the screws. The vision, the calling, compels to action, immediate and sustained, and if we do not act upon it, it turns to “dry rot.” The vision not followed becomes a burden, a source of regret.

“Follow me,” is Jesus invitation to disciples from the first century to the present. When we want to know why Jesus and not someone else, the response is “Come and see.” We will never know our reason for being through reason alone. We discover meaning and purpose and significance only when we step out in faith, when we act on the call we have received.

Inspiration follows following our call; it does not come before we take the first step. All who consciously accept their calling and do their job with love and imagination are visited by inspiration. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep discovering new challenges in it.

This does not mean we are free from doubts and misgivings. Rather, we risk following the call because we can see the inspiring goodness and beauty of genuine love manifest in Jesus' life and in the lives of some of his followers. With that love as our guide we use all that we know and believe to seek a deeper understanding of life.

The real difference in vocations is not a superiority of some callings or gifts over others. Apostles are no more important than line cooks. We are called to serve according to our gifts; the faithful exercise of each gift serves the well-being of all. The real difference is found in those who become holy by doing what they alone are called by God to do. Brother Lawrence became holy washing pots and pans in the monastery kitchen.

For Christians, the story of Jesus' life reveals the human condition: birth (his in a barn and star-studded), family (he left his nuclear family for a communal one), education (growing in wisdom and independence), work (teacher and healer), dinner with friends (accused of being a glutton and drunkard), betrayal (by a confidant), abandonment (by all but two or three women), death (tortured and cruelly executed by the state as a criminal), raised to new life by the power of God's love.

Christianity at its core is neither thoughts nor beliefs. Christianity is a story of the transforming power of love; it is accepting a love that patiently endures, a love that forms us into the image and likeness of God. We are called first to let ourselves be desired and loved by God. We are called secondly to learn to desire what God desires.

The story of Christian faith and practice makes sense of the human condition. It is a story that makes truth into a *presence*, and makes us present to truth. We are not asked to leave our minds behind when we are asked to follow Jesus. Rather, we gain confidence in our ability to use our minds to find deep and abiding patterns in our lives and in human history.

We live in a time when it is fashionable to believe no patterns exist that give meaning and significance to human life. We are afraid there is nothing in this world that can give us the fullness we crave. Some repress or deny this hunger and lose themselves in futile and destructive pursuits. Others acknowledge the hunger but deny that anything exists to satisfy it. They become resigned to "necessity," leading lives of quiet desperation. Still others embrace the hunger and seek the bread of life that fills and fulfills.

Our vocation, our calling, is not alien to our nature. It is the fulfillment of what we have been created for. Our vocation, our calling, is not fulfilled in any particular job or profession. It is related much more broadly to the long-term shaping of our lives by the desires "we own." Fulfilling these desires can of course include jobs and other work, but also every other aspect of life.

"One day at dusk," Frederick Buechner writes, "I was filled with a sweet panic and anguish of longing for I had no idea what. I knew my life could never be complete until I found it. . . . It was the upward-reaching and fathomless hungering, heart-breaking love for the beauty of the world at

its most beautiful, and, beyond that, for that beauty east of the sun and west of the moon which is past the reach of all but our most desperate desiring and is finally the beauty of Beauty itself, of Being itself and what lies at the heart of Being.”

Whatever virtuous longing creates a fathomless hungering, a heart-breaking love within you, is a call worth risking all you have and all you are in order to find its fulfillment. If we do not own our call as a means to fulfillment, it will grip us as regret at our End.

PRAYER: Etty Hillesum (1914-1943)

Oh God,

I thank you for having created me as I am.

I thank you for the sense of fulfillment I sometimes have:

that fulfillment is after all nothing but being filled with you.

I promise You to strive my whole life long for beauty,

and harmony and also humility and true love,

whispers of which I hear inside me during my best moments.