

## Call Stories

This past summer, we attended the wedding of my niece in Portland, Oregon. I was not involved in the service in any way, which broke my string of having officiated at the last four weddings in the Aaseng clan.

I had no part in the ceremony because when asked if I would officiate at this wedding, I begged off. My excuse was that I was a little burned out by all these weddings and would appreciate a chance to get off the stage at a family function and just enjoy myself as a guest.

I discovered that this decision of mine to decline officiating is part of the prevailing narrative of the wedding.

When I heard this narrative, it was a surprise to me. That is not at all how I remember things. I don't recall ever being asked. Although my memory can be suspect at times, I'm quite certain about this one, because I cannot imagine forgetting that I was asked to perform a wedding.

Nor can I imagine declining such a request. Had I been asked I would have been honored and I would have done it.

I was perfectly fine with not officiating; my ordained younger brother handled it well, and, given the circumstances, he was probably a better choice. And frankly, it *was* nice being off duty at a family event for a change.

The fact that I don't believe things happened the way conventional wisdom has it pales in significance to the larger story of the wedding. This story of my declining to officiate had no impact whatsoever on the beauty, the joy, and the meaning of the ceremony, so it's not worth a battle of memories to try and correct it.

I bring this up simply as an example of how unreliable memory can be in relating stories. The playwright Oscar Wilder wrote, "Memory is the diary we all carry with us." Which sounds sensible and witty, but is utter nonsense.

Memory is not like a diary that's written down. It's not like tape that you play back. Psychologists have found that even some of our strongest and most vivid memories are surprisingly unreliable.

Memory is nothing more than an impression of something that happened, with a few vivid details locked in place. Overall narratives are far more significant than those impressions that do not strictly conform to reality.

Linda and I find we have far less confusion about what happened in the past ever since she started keeping an actual daily log that we can later consult. Given the way memory works, it can save a lot of frustration and arguments.

This business about memory is helpful to keep in mind when comparing the various Gospel stories of how Jesus called his disciples. Our Gospel for today reports Mark's version of events.

Jesus happened to be passing by the shore of the Sea of Galilee in the early days of his ministry when he came across two pairs of fisherman brothers hard at work: Simon & Andrew, and James & John. He called them to follow him, they immediately left their nets to do so, and the rest was history.

Many of us know that story, but that's not quite the way everyone remembered it. As Luke's Gospel tells it, Jesus was addressing a crowd by the Sea of Galilee when things started to get out of hand. So many people gathered around him that he was getting crowded into the lake.

Looking around, he spotted two empty boats on the shore. One of them belonged to a guy named Simon, who was nearby putting away nets and grouching about being skunked in the early morning fishing expedition.

Jesus got into Simon's boat and asked him to row out a ways so he could address the crowd without being crushed. Simon complied with the request. When Jesus was done speaking, he then thanked Simon by guiding a fishing expedition in which Simon and his partners, James and John, caught a miraculous number of fish.

That told Simon that he was in the presence of someone special. He begged Jesus to leave him, on the grounds that a poor, sinful fisherman was not worthy of Jesus's attention. But Jesus ignored that and invited Simon and his business partners, James and John, to follow him. They did and the rest was history.

The Gospel of John that we encountered last week remembers a very different story than either of those versions.

According to this Gospel, Simon was not even there when Jesus began to gather his disciples. It was John the Baptist who started things. When he saw Jesus pass by one day, he urged two of his own disciples, one of whom was Andrew, to follow Jesus instead.

So these two started trailing after Jesus, who did not indicate at first that he even knew what they wanted. After spending a little time with him, Andrew quickly became convinced Jesus was the Messiah. He then found his brother Simon, and recruited him as a disciple. Phillip then recruited his friend Nathanael.

Okay, somebody's memory is fuzzy here. Not surprising—that's how memory works, especially when events are not written down until many years after they happen. The details that people remember are going to be different.

This is a major concern only if you are a literalist who believes the Bible was dictated by God. If you understand the Bible as the book of faith that reveals the truth about God, the discrepancies are neither surprising nor important.

What is important is the undisputed fact that in each of these stories, people experienced, as Pastor Christine talked about last week, the call to be disciples of Jesus, and that they responded to that call. What I find interesting about these different call stories is that they illustrate the different ways in which God calls us to be a part of the mission.

The story from Mark is the one with the fewest details and the least drama. People are going about their lives, minding their own business. When they have an encounter with Jesus, they don't question anything.

They seem to have this strong inner sense of what they should do. Once they are alerted to what Jesus wants, they just do it. Jesus says, "Follow me." They answer, "Okay."

This corresponds to the way those who have grown up in strong Christian traditions respond to God's call. Responding to the call is nothing dramatic; it's just who they are. When they sense that God wants them to do something, they do it.

Like the episode in Mark, theirs is not a very exciting call story. No burning bush like Moses or lightning strike on the Road to Damascus, like Paul. When I arrived at Luther Seminary, I remember the first year seminary students were eagerly comparing

call stories to the ministry. I got the sense that they found Mark's kind of call stories uninspiring and even disappointing.

But disciples called in this way are generally solid, reliable church members, are strong supporters of the Christian mission, and are quick to offer their time and talent and offerings to that mission. When they encounter a special appeal that touches their heart, they respond generously.

Just because the details of their call are few and somewhat ordinary does not make their call less valid or their response less faithful. *Thank God for disciples like these.*

In Luke's Gospel, the call story is more complicated. Simon is drawn into discipleship through a request for action. There is a problem that needs to be addressed. The crowd is growing out of control. Jesus needs some way to speak to them in an orderly manner so that people can hear what he has to say without creating an unsafe situation.

It so happens that Simon has the resources and skills to help with the situation—he's got a boat and he knows how to handle it. When asked to row Jesus out into the water, he's happy to help.

Notice that Jesus does not call him to be a disciple first, and then ask him to help out with the mission. The most urgent need is the fulfillment of the mission, and Simon does not need to be a follower of Jesus to contribute.

But as Simon spends time around Jesus, he recognizes that this is someone special. When Jesus invites him to join his mission, he is greatly intimidated. When he agreed to help out, he wasn't expecting to part of this mission. But having seen what Jesus can do and having developed a bit of a relationship with him, he puts his trust in him.

This call corresponds to those people today who become involved with Christ's ministry through service. They may or may not be particularly religious, but they do feel called to do something, to use their gifts and talents in the service of humanity.

I am often told that millennials are particularly drawn into mission this way. They don't necessarily feel a desire to be a part of religious tradition or to get involved in meetings or classes. They are not into doctrine. But they do want to do something

useful with their lives—to be a part of something meaningful and larger than themselves.

It is important for the church to recognize this and make it a high priority to connect people with service opportunities that use their talents and abilities. There are many serious problems in this creation that need to be addressed—some of them on a mega scale, some on a one-to-one basis.

The church is doing God’s will when it identifies areas of need, and then offers people opportunities to use their resources and skills to be of service.

Too often we make the mistake of thinking we first need to get people assimilated into the culture of a church. I believe that if we trust that the Spirit of God is alive and working, then as people spend more time around genuine, committed faith and get to know God better, they will find themselves called into a deeper and more lasting relationship. *Thank God for disciples like these.*

Then there is the John account, where we have people who are looking for something in their lives. They have a spiritual hunger. There is something missing in their lives. They are looking to connect with God in some meaningful way. They are just not sure how to do that.

They have tried a number of options but have not yet found what they are looking for. . . until they are led to Christ by friends and companions who have experienced him. And in Jesus, they do find what has been missing in their lives.

Religious analysts have labeled such people Seekers. Much of the evangelism in the past couple of decades has been aimed at these people, to the point where Seeker services have become a part of Christian evangelism strategy.

There are Christian theologians who discard the whole idea of seekers. It is God who calls us through the Gospel, not we who through our own tireless efforts, find God. And there is a certain arrogance to the “I found Jesus” attitude.

But what this call story tells me is that just because we’re suspicious of the idea of finders, that should not blind us to the reality of seekers. All of the disciples in the John story are seekers. But none of them are finders. Each of them is directed to Jesus by someone else.

Jesus calls people through the witness of others who already know and trust him. John the Baptist directs the seeker Andrew to spend some time with Jesus. After doing so and learning who Jesus is, Andrew invites his brother, Simon, to learn the same. Philip experiences the love and life of Jesus and then goes and invites his friend Nathaniel to do the same.

There are many seekers around us. They are looking for something to fill a spiritual emptiness in their lives. They are looking for healing, for love, for hope. They are looking to make sense of their lives and the world. They don't know where to look—they may try just about anything.

The most common way such people are called into a church is they are led there by others. Just as Andrew led Simon to Jesus and Phillip led Nathanael, someone who cares about them invites them to take a look at what Jesus is offering. No hard sell or nagging or blame—just “I've found something here. Why don't you come and take a look?”

*Thank God for those who come to discipleship in this way, and for those who invite them.*

There is actually one other story of Jesus calling a disciple, and that is the case of Matthew. Matthew was despised by all society. He was a tax collector, who collaborated with the hated Romans, and enriched himself by cheating his own people. Jesus came to him and said, “Matthew, you don't have to live that way. You don't have to be that person. Turn away from that, repent and live a life that is worth living.”

Jesus continues to call such people today, people who are trapped in a terrible world by their poor choices, mistakes, bitterness, or greed. Jesus calls them saying, “You don't have to live that way. You don't have to be that person. Turn away from that, repent, and live a life worth living.” And they do. *Thank God for disciples like these.*

Being called by God is a life-changing experience. It is of utmost importance to know the ways that God calls, how to recognize a call. The dynamics of a call are a lot different than the voice of God simply dictating, “Hey you, I want you to do this, this and this.”

We all experience calls from God. We don't experience them in the same way; we may not remember them in the same way. But in whatever form it takes, a call from God is always an invitation to experience new life—a life worth living.

“I have no pleasure in the death of anyone,” says the Lord God. “Answer the call, follow me, and live.”