

**Third Sunday in Epiphany**  
**January 22, 2012**  
**The Rev. John A. Baldwin**

During my first year in seminary, I was reading in my dorm room on a Sunday afternoon when the pay phone at the end of our hall began to ring. Being one of only a handful in the building at that hour I went to answer the call. When I picked up the phone, a female voice asked, "Is the chaplain there?" Now I had done but just a little ministry that Fall at a nearby hospital, so I was pretty certain she was not calling me specifically. Rather than saying she had the wrong number, however, I inquired further. A dying woman had requested a chaplain and this pay phone was the number they had listed.

Although it involved some difficulty getting to the hospital, I felt called...both literally and figuratively, to go visit this dying woman. By the time I arrived at the woman's bedside, she had slipped into a coma. As I sat by her bed praying for her, I was feeling a little foolish. Some call! My afternoon plans had been disrupted. I had rushed off on this mission of mercy.... for what purpose? She didn't even know I was present. As I was entertaining thoughts of going back to seminary, the woman's daughter came in. She sat down beside me and began opening up her feelings to me. She spoke of her love for her mother, her anxiety and fear at the prospect of losing her, and the grief she would feel at her mother's death. All at once it dawned on me..... I had not been called to be present to a dying woman, but rather to her daughter.

This moment in time was one of many in which I've heard a call to action. Some I've responded to, others I've ignored. On this occasion, I could easily have justified inaction with a lot of good excuses. My faithful response, however, enabled God to use me as a channel of his love and healing presence in a way I had no way of fore-knowing when I answered the telephone.

God's calling of men & women to faithful response is a Biblical motif articulated many times in Holy Scripture. In our Old Testament reading we hear about God calling Jonah a second time to go preach to the Ninevites. The first time, Jonah had fled from God's Call by boat; a terrible storm had arisen; he had been swept overboard and swallowed by a great fish, only to prove so indigestible that the fish had vomited him up on the beach. Now in his second opportunity, Jonah allows himself to be a vessel of God's grace, and he effectively calls the Ninevites back into a harmonious relationship with God.

In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, we hear how Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James & John away from their vocation as fishermen. They really have no idea what they are being called to ..... "fish for people?" ....how crazy is that?.....But in their faithful response, they allow themselves to become vessels of God's love & grace in the world. It's Jesus words that stir them to embrace this "foolishness". "The time is fulfilled & the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent & believe in the Gospel." We might paraphrase Jesus' words as: "What you've been aching for is here. Right now. Reach out. Taste it. Breathe it in. Refocus your life & believe in the good news of the Gospel."

What these two scripture readings have in common is an openness to listening, and then faithful response. They emerge from a Biblical understanding that God is active in human lives. He has hopes, wishes, dreams & desires for how we live, and move, and have our being in the world; and further, aside from a few isolated angel stories, God acts primarily through human beings to accomplish his purposes on earth.

These and other Biblical stories of calling draw our attention to people who were not only good listeners, but who were able to name their response as a call from God, and follow it faithfully. They are great examples, but they are by no means unique. God has been issuing calls to men and women down

through the centuries, over and over again. Some are very dramatic, but others are so ordinary we often don't even recognize them as such. They may be as undramatic as answering a pay phone at the end of a hall.

You may not have discerned God calling you to specific action recently, but have you acted with kindness rather than anger in a tense situation? Have you thought about someone who was ill and hurting, and called them on the phone? Have you put aside your own agenda to respond to the needs of someone else? If you have, perhaps you were unknowingly responding to God's call to action. You may even have responded to a call from God just a short while ago, by merely getting out of bed, and coming here to worship this morning. Our faithful response to God's nudgings and whisperings allow us to become channels of His love and healing power.

Sadly, more often than we would probably care to admit, we miss or ignore God's calls to action....we roll over and go back to slumbering, we dismiss them by making excuses for ourselves, or we live day to day unaware that God isn't just issuing calls to others, but to every single one of us.

Coming to a faith that is authentic entails believing that God is real, God is accessible, God cares about who we are and what we do, and God guides us when we listen. It involves setting aside time for active listening, prayer, reading scripture, reflecting and pondering. A life that is too jammed with noise, stress, and busyness makes it very difficult for God to catch our attention.

Now, not every little thing that rattles through our brains is God talking to us. We need to measure and authenticate them with measuring sticks provided to us in Scripture like the Great Commandment and the Sermon on the Mount articulated by Jesus, and the Fruits of the Spirit laid out by St. Paul. Is the opportunity for love, grace, healing or blessing present? Is it something that calls us to offer ourselves in ways to others that are self-less, inconvenient or sacrificial? Does it involve surrendering our will, our egos, our comfort, our control, and allowing God to work through us? If the answer to these questions is yes, how dare we ignore them?

I'd like to close with a powerful witness story shared with a group of my clergy colleagues at a luncheon last Wednesday by Dallas Stamper, director of PIN ministries (People in Need). Ten years ago, Dallas was a young family man, on the upward path to management at General Electric, who in his prayer time heard the question: "Do you love the poor?" After saying, "Of course I do!" he realized he didn't really know anyone who was truly poor.

So he and his wife decided to take sandwiches down to the Oceanfront on a Saturday morning. They found 4 homeless men, distributed the sandwiches, and stayed around to talk with them for 4 hours. They returned the next Saturday and after the men got over the shock that someone would come a second time, word began to spread, and soon they were distributing lots of sandwiches on Saturday mornings. It wasn't just about feeding, however, it was about loving some people who didn't feel very loved or loveable. This effort at loving, led Dallas and his family to give up his job, downsize their home dramatically, and devote their time, love and energy to ministry to the most desperate of the homeless, those living out in the woods of Virginia Beach. Today PIN ministries, like JCOC, are on the front lines of ministry to the homeless in our community, providing food, shelter and clothing. All of this stemming from a simple question in a time of prayer, "Do you love the poor?"

I urge you to pay heed to God's call to you personally, which means setting aside the time to listen regularly. It may be very small whisperings day to day, but one day, who knows, it may be a "Do you love the poor?" question, or a "Come follow me on the road to the fullness of life" invitation. Amen.