

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
7 February 2010**

*5 Epiphany: Ps 138; Isa 6:1-8, 9-13;
1 Cor 15:1-11; Lk 5:1-11*

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All three of today's readings show us the same response to being called by God: all three readings show someone initially rejecting the call from God because the person is unworthy. "Woe is me!" says the speaker in Isaiah. "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." Paul tells us that when Christ called him to his ministry of evangelism, Christ appeared to him "last of all, as to one untimely born. . . . For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." And Peter, just before Jesus calls him and the other fishermen to follow him, falls down at Jesus' knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

God does not always call his disciples from the best and the brightest, from the most virtuous, the most blameless, the most worthy. Over and over again in scripture, we hear that God calls on some of the most unlikely people to do his work. In one way or another I've told you bits of the very unlikely story of my "call" to the priesthood: how I refused to use the language of call; how I went to seminary with little intention of seeking ordination; how I enjoyed my progress toward a seminary degree while resisting and arguing whenever the discussion arose about whether the degree should eventually lead towards the priesthood. I tell bits and pieces of the story to describe how unlikely a candidate I was, to point out not only how ready I was to remind God how sinful I was, but also to tell God what a ridiculous idea I thought it was that I should become a priest. As you know, I came around, though very slowly. In the letter my seminary wrote to the bishop describing my potential, it said that I was "both ready to take on the challenges of ordination, and at the same time able to smile when contemplating the absurdity of God's invitation to do so."

What I've learned about God's call is not just that if someone as unlikely as me could be called then any one of us can also be called; not just that people are called to all kinds of ministries, and not only the ordained ones; not just that God can display a very weird sense of humor when he calls someone like me to become a priest. What I've learned is that God not only *can* call any one of us to ministry, God in fact *does* call all of us to ministry, all the time. As Christians fulfilling our baptismal vows, we are all called to the same ministry of mending the broken world we find around us, each in whatever way we can, using whatever gifts we learn we have, mending just that little sliver of the world that we can manage, and teaming up with each other to take on an even bigger patch than what we might be able to handle alone.

God does not just call prophets and apostles, nuns and priests, bishops and popes. God also calls mothers and fathers, children and youth, teachers and nurses, doctors and social workers, economists and engineers, politicians and presidents, artists and writers. The world is a complicated world, and so is its brokenness. To mend it will require a lot of different gifts, a lot of different talents, and a lot of different efforts, all devoted to making the world more just, more compassionate, and more loving.

I have a seminary friend who has always taken priesthood more solemnly than I—not necessarily more seriously, but more solemnly. In one e-mail exchange I kept referring to “the job,” and he wrote back, “Stop calling it a ‘JOB!’” I of course knew that he preferred to think of priesthood as a calling, a vocation, and that he believed that as priests we had been called in a special way that non-priests are not.

But much as I love my friend, I’ve learned not to think of my call as any more special than the call that has been made to each one of you. In a book that both my friend and I had to read, called *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*, William Countryman writes: “The primary Christian priesthood, like the fundamental priesthood of all humanity, belongs to the sphere of everyday human activity. It is not divorced from the profane world; it stands at the center of it.” All of us Christians are called to see the sacred, the sacramental, in the miraculous gift of life that God has given to us. We are all called to be ministers to those around us, and to live out the sacred and the sacramental in our day-to-day relationships with them.

If, like me, you think that by avoiding burning bushes, roads where blinding flashes might knock you off your horse, or heavenly hallucinations—if you think that by avoiding these things you can avoid hearing God’s call to you, Frederick Buechner helps us to understand that we are all being called:

“Vocation”—it comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a person is called to by God.

“There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Sueprego, or Self-Interest.

“By and large a good rule for finding out is this: The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you’ve presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are you’ve missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you’re bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a), but probably aren’t helping your patients much either.

“Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet. Know yourself and where you find that deep gladness. Look around at the many ways in which our world is broken and hurting. Then listen for God’s call. And when you hear the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” learn from my experience: instead of resisting, arguing, joking, and avoiding, it’s just easier. and it saves a lot of time, to say, “Here am I; send me!”