

This past week I had the privilege of journeying with 17 people who have felt God’s calling to ministry. I always love this time with people of all ages and stages of life who are excited about what God is calling them to do next. In preparation for leading this Candidacy Summit I have been reading the call stories of some of the most inspirational Christians.

I have read the call story of Mother Teresa many times, but after reading it through again I noticed something I had not picked up on before. It seems that Mother Teresa was not just called by God one time, she was called a second time. The story goes that Mother Teresa was riding a train on the way to an annual retreat. At that time, she had been a successful principle of a school in Calcutta for many years. That day on the train she experienced what she would later call “a call within a call.”ⁱ That day God called her to go another way. Instead of educating children Christ called her to “establish a religious community dedicated to the service of the poorest of the poor.”ⁱⁱ

Mother Teresa spent the rest of her life caring for the poor. I am thankful for her faithful witness and response to God’s calling.

Mother Teresa teaches us that discernment and change our part of our discipleship journey and that we must be open to where God is calling us next.

Our Scripture for today from both Genesis and Acts show that discernment and change are both necessary as we seek redemption.

In Genesis 33 we find Jacob about to encounter his brother. In chapter 32 of Genesis we remember that Jacob was wrestling with God and that he came out of this encounter changed, blessed, and sent forward with hope. Now this is the moment of truth. Would God spare his life? Or would his brother Esau come and kill him?

Esau had a lot to be upset about. First, Jacob took away Esau’s birthright. He took advantage of his brother when he was starving and vulnerable. Esau ended up trading his birthright, almost without thinking, for some soup. Jacob then tricked his dying father to bestow his blessing upon him. Gaining both the blessing and birthright meant that Esau now had to serve his younger brother for the rest of his life, and he would lose out on his father’s inheritance.

Esau was outraged and planned to kill Jacob after his father died. To preserve his life, Esau’s mother, Rebekah, made plans for Jacob to flee so that he would not be killed.

Over the many years his brother was in hiding, Esau had made a life for himself. He had gained power and prestige as evidenced by the entourage he had with him. He could have been an agent of death that day when he encountered the brother that betrayed him. Instead, he chose to forgive his brother and welcome his brother’s family into his own (Gen. 33).

Jacob went on from this moment and instead of heading into certain death, he walked into the open arms of his brother, Esau. In fact, Esau ran to meet him and embraced him. This moment did not happen until Jacob wrestled with God. Through wrestling with God Jacob was forever changed and given a new name, Israel. Now he had a new identity and he would get to live another day.

Discernment is about letting life as we know it die so that we can pursue God’s will and not our own. That is what makes it so hard. It is not always fun to wrestle with God, and yet that is exactly what God is calling us to do, because through this time of wrestling we will come out the other side knowing more clearly what God has called us to do. So, don’t be afraid to wrestle with God; in fact, I highly recommend it! It worked out well for Jacob. He was able to go home and be reunited with his brother.

So often we are afraid of discernment. I think we know that when we spend time in discernment that our lives as we know them will change. This is because God is always calling us to change so that we can be molded more closely to God our Creator.

Today we continue in the fourth week of our “New Normal Sermon Series.” Just as the people in the book of Acts were learning how to be the church. We also find ourselves asking what will church look like during this time of new normal?

For us to faithfully live into this new season we must make room for discernment and change. This is the gift we must be aware of in this time when things have slowed down. This is our opportunity to discern and spend more time with God asking what God would like us to do next.

All throughout the Bible we see so many faithful people of God who went through a period of discernment and we see that their lives were changed forever. Like Jacob, the Apostle Paul is another person in the Bible who went through a season of discernment and change. You see the Apostle Paul was a devout Jew. He did not understand why people followed Jesus and he persecuted them severely.

Paul believed that this is what God was calling him to do. In fact, he had become successful in pursuing this goal, even though it was costing other people their lives.

Until one day everything changed. Like Mother Teresa Paul experienced “a call within a call.”ⁱⁱⁱ The resurrected Christ confronted then Saul on the road to Damascus. In that moment Saul was blinded by the light of Christ and his life was forever changed.

Saul spent three days in darkness unable to see. During this time, the Bible tells us he was praying (Acts 9:11). Saul spent three days discerning and wondering what had just happened to him. Would he ever see again?

Now he knew that Jesus was real, he could no longer deny the resurrected Christ. The first lesson that God taught Saul was that he needed to rely on the body of Christ.

After three days, a devoted disciple of Christ named Ananias laid hands on Saul and he regained his sight. He went forward from that moment changed. He was baptized, renamed as Paul, and became one of the most effective evangelists of his time.

Saul had to be confronted by Christ before he was ready to spend time in discernment and change into the person God was calling him to be. Just as God wrestled with Jacob and confronted Paul on the road to Damascus God is still wrestling with us so that we will mold our will more closely to the will of God.

The moment we profess Jesus Christ with our lips, the Holy Spirit enters into our hearts. God is no longer whispering from the outside but speaking to us on the inside. This is where our wrestling match with God originates. Anytime we think, say, or do anything contrary to the will of God, the Holy Spirit wrestles with our souls. God wrestles with us because God cares about us.

During this pandemic you may have found yourself wrestling with God. You may have a lot of unanswered questions. Perhaps you have felt isolated or anxious. Maybe you are angry and wondering will we ever return to normal?

I imagine there were days that Jacob and Paul longed for the past. Perhaps they did not want to repeat every moment, but in their past lives they did not have to work as hard to participate in God’s will. But if they stayed in the behaviors of the past, they never would have gotten to experience redemption.

Jacob found redemption when he found reconciliation with his brother. A brother who only a couple years previously wanted to kill him. Now instead of being in hiding, Jacob was reunited with his family. He found new life and a way forward.

Paul found redemption the moment he changed into someone who brought life and hope to people instead of taking part in actions that brought death. Paul’s redemption came after he recognized Christ by saying: “Who are you Lord?” (Acts 9:5).

We too can find redemption through the process of discernment and change. Just like Mother Teresa we must know that God calls us to do different things at different times. At one point of our life we may be called to serve on church council, or as a trustee or lay leader. At another point we may feel called to participate in caring for our members by phone calls and prayers.

We like Jacob and the Apostle Paul must continue to be open to how God is calling us to serve. The best way to figure out how God is calling us is to try the very thing that God has placed on our hearts. Don’t be afraid to spend time discerning where God is calling you to go next.

God is calling all of us on the Rappahannock Charge to be open to the way that church is evolving. Church is not just a building, but the body of Christ. We remain connected beyond these walls; we remain the body of Christ when we embody Christ’s ministry to the world. God is calling us to be creative as we move forward together.

So how will you take part in discerning God’s next step for your lives and this church?

I encourage you to reflect each day on these two questions:

1) Who are you Lord?

Spend time reading the book of Acts and seeing how Christ’s ministry continues to live on through the disciples. Who has Christ been in your life, how has Christ been reflected to you through others?

2) Who do you want me to be God?

What is God asking you to change in your life? Is it a pattern of behavior? Is it your inability to trust in God or the body of Christ? It is to surrender?

We all have things to work on as we grow in our faith. But the good news for our lives is that through the process of discernment and change, we too can take part in Christ’s redemption.

Redemption can happen in our lives when we care more about God’s will than our own. It happens when we seek forgiveness and repent of our sins. Redemption happens when we are confronted by Christ and we change our behavior. Finally, redemption happens when we do the things God is calling us to do.

May we not be afraid of discernment and change so that we may also experience the fullness of life and redemption that God has set before us. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/answering-a-call-within-a-call-5687>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

Additional Resources

New Interpreter’s Study Bible. Vol I & IX. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2015.