

### “Jesus Calls His Own”

Some years ago, at a Kansas City Royals baseball game, a dog walked onto the playing field and wandered around. The game was stopped so that the dog could be removed. The umpires tried to shoo him off. The players yelled and hollered at him, "Get out, go home, you idiot dog." By this time the dog was thoroughly confused, and so ran here and there, and finally lay down on third base, refusing to move. A sports reporter summed up the situation when he wrote, "The problem was that the dog could hear no dominant voice."<sup>1</sup> We could go further and say that the poor dog could not hear his master's voice – so he gave up in despair.

Who or what calls to your life? That is the question. There are so many to choices; so many paths that beckon; all kinds of leaders who urge us down different roads. It can be confusing. Yet everyone must choose; and it is so very important who or what we follow.

A young woman goes off to college, maybe alone for the first time in a city or on a large campus. There is a smorgasbord of lifestyles and beliefs for her to follow: intellectualism, unrestrained individualism, various political/religious ideologies, crass hedonism, exotic religions and, of course, alcohol and drugs. They all say, "Follow me and you will have a full life" or at least a lot of fun. What should she believe? Who should she follow?

How about the young man, well-educated, attractive, successful in his career, and yet he senses an absence of direction in his life? He had done military service, hoping to "find himself." But in the intervening years, even through college, he wasn't sure he was on the right path. He has reached that stage in life where others look up to him. Privately, he might say, "I'm not sure what to believe or who to follow."

Or there is the mother of two, divorced some years ago and still struggling to raise her children and provide for the household. She had thought that her faith could sustain her, but lately she isn't sure and feels so worn down. "Am I following the true Savior or not?" she might ask.

Then there was the man who was at the pinnacle of his career. He had reached a position of prominence, responsibility, financial success, and retirement was not far off. But now came that nagging feeling of emptiness. "I've given myself to this job, I've followed the boss' directions and become a boss myself. And what do I have? Is this all there is?" He has found that success doesn't bring happiness and a full life. Success only brings success. So what should he do now? Who or what should he follow now?

This is all about calling. Someone or something calls to us and we respond. How we respond; how we live our life, then, becomes our calling. It may not be your job, your title, your status in the community. Those things may simply be methods for you to fulfill the calling you have either responded to, chosen, or unconsciously fallen into.

The New Testament uses the term call or calling in reference to all Christians, in the sense that all Christians are called to be in ministry and mission with and for God. A Christian calling is not something that comes dramatically with flashes of light or loud voice out of the clouds. Nor is it

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<sup>1</sup>Ray LeBlanc The: *Augsburg Sermons 3*, from a story of Rev. John Brokhoff, (Augsburg, Minneapolis: Gospels, Series C, 1994),118.

something that comes only to those who become pastors or priests or missionaries. Nor is it about our own desires and choices, and not necessarily about our abilities, talents, and temperament. The Bible simply assumes that every Christian will have a calling. To having a calling in life assumes One who calls... it is God, in the person of Jesus Christ, who has been calling you all of your life...

Who or what calls to your life? It is a timely question, given that this is a presidential election year. What do you mean Americans don't believe in the return of the messiah? Every four years many Americans believe a messiah is near!

In the midst of all the choices Christ answers that he is the true shepherd who offers a life that is more than we'll find anywhere else. And what does his leadership look like? Jesus used the image of a shepherd to describe his leadership. In the ancient Near East, a king was often referred to as a shepherd. Hammurabi, king of Babylon, was called the shepherd of his people. Other lesser kings were similarly called shepherds of their people. In ancient Israel, God was king of the nation. So it is not surprising that the shepherd image is used for God. Psalm 80 speaks of God as a shepherd, and Psalm 23 uses the familiar imagery of a shepherd who carefully leads and cares for the flock. I have no doubt that Psalm 23 was well-known to the people of Jesus' time and place, and that he knew it by heart. What kind of leader does it show us? You know the Psalm: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." With Him, I don't need anything else.

"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice" (John 10:3-4, NIV). Christ offers us a True Shepherd who cares for the sheep and knows the sheep. He promises us life in its fullness, as he modeled in giving life to others. Through him we have a taste of the promised life eternal, now. This is in stark contrast to the kind of leaders that so many young, Muslim men, we hear about, are responding to. Those leaders promise fame and life eternal to those who *take* the lives of others. Jesus says he is the true leader because he cares for and knows his own, and teaches them to *give* life to others. Can it be as simple as that? Yes, it really is. Reliable guidance will follow as one lives more and more with Christ, and above all listen for His call.

Does it really matter who we follow? Indeed it does! The stakes are exceedingly high. This is not simply a contest among religions and philosophies. This is not even a struggle between religious and secular values. It is a matter of life and death. Events in the news bear this out... I wonder if people in our society, in this church, realize the content of the philosophical environment to which we, and our children, are exposed. Many segments of Western civilization has cut itself loose from the moorings of God; demanding complete freedom, with humanity as the final arbiter of truth and morals. Adrift as we are, it should come as no surprise to us that tragedies, crimes, and horrors occur. Without God we lose those things that make civilized life possible: truth, with a standard outside personal experience to guide; a purpose for living beyond selfishness; a connection to eternity and eternal values; a sober knowledge that humans can do good but not always, and that we are *mostly* rational, but not all. These are the things that cannot grow in those who never know that they are fearfully and wonderfully made by God, and called by their one true leader, Jesus Christ.

Not only the terrorist atrocities we read or hear about, but also the terrible violence in our own city, are vivid symbols of the deep-seated sickness within the soul of our society; a sickness within us all to some degree. I predict that we will see more of this sickness if we continue to drift away from God. And there will be heroic attempts to respond to these things through legislation, school and civic groups. But they will be limited in effectiveness. There is no government large or intrusive

enough to govern an immoral people. Without God's grace, life will be disjointed with all kinds of selfish, goofy, or dangerous demons that lead to nothingness and death.

We have seen enough history to know that political leaders who come with big promises, count on our short memories, so that we'll foot the bill for their mistakes. We have seen enough TV to know that false religious leaders who promise to solve all our problems usually lead us to pay for theirs. Now more than ever we need to take hold of the hand that Christ offers.

God continues to call each person; some hear the Good Shepherd's voice, and respond. I know that many of you have responded – or should I say *are responding*? We Methodists, of all Christian peoples, should be aware that our journey to follow and become more like Christ, involves transformation of all aspects of our lives. Have you heard the Great Shepherd's voice call your time in service to him? Has His voice been heard in your family relationships, in your work relationships, in your church relationships? Has His voice been heard in your personal finances – do you indulge yourself before you return to Him that which his grace provides in the first place? Has His voice been heard in the problems and conflicts you face today – or do you hold on to them, attempting to control?

Christ is the right leader. God raised Him to be. Your union with Him is the one necessity for a sound life. Jesus said, "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.... I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:9, NIV).

Those who heed his call, and follow Him in *all* aspects of life, will find fulfillment and freedom. Why not you? Why not now?