

## **Sermon on Call, by Beth Mahler -- Sunday, August 21, 2005**

Genesis 1:1-5/Matthew 4:18-22/Ephesians 1: 15-22

If you have been around this church community long enough, you have probably heard these phrases: "sounding a call", "hearing a call", or "responding to a call". The concept of call in reference to mission has been inseparable from the life of Church of the Covenant from the very beginning when Bev Cosby and Irving Stubbs heard the call to create an alternative kind of church in 1953 to the present as we each work with what it means to be a part of this community and to be on mission to the world.

As with other such Biblical and theological terms, the meaning of "call" can become fuzzy, distorted or contradictory depending on the context or the person to whom you are talking. However, it is in hopes of clarifying rather than clouding the issue that I would like to share with you my own spiritual pilgrimage in struggling to hear and respond to God's claim on my life.

Since I was born into a Presbyterian minister's family, I was introduced to the concept of God's calling people to a particular ministry fairly early in life, since Presbyterian ministers change churches on the basis of being "called" by a particular congregation. In my early, rather literal understanding of this process, I visualized God, my father, and the prospective church in sort of a three-way conference call. Actually, I'm not so sure that I was far off base, although the process was and continues to be more complex than my original image. As a child hearing the Biblical stories of God's calls to various people, I had no trouble imagining God pointing out to Abraham the new country to which he was to go or speaking to Moses from a bush that was on fire and sending him off to save the Israelites from Egypt. Equally easy was to imagine Peter, James, and John dropping their nets full of fish on the shore and hastening after Jesus. It was simple: God or Jesus told you what to do and you did it, even if you protested a little at first, like Jonah before he was swallowed by a big fish.

As I grew older and began to think about my future as an adult, I thought

in terms of trying to figure out what it was that God wanted me to do with my life. As you will see presently, that process did not move in a straight line. Since my family's life and values were focused on the church, it was not surprising that in my adolescent years I thought variously about being a missionary, church musician, or director of Christian education. I attended a Presbyterian related college, I started out as a Christian education major; and then I switched to music, majoring in organ, which had been my passion since I was thirteen years old. When I graduated from college, I spent the summer trying to decide whether to go to graduate school to study church music or Christian education. I found out that it isn't always easy to discern what God wanted me to do - either the phone lines were down or there was a different way of communicating with God. I spent many hours vacillating between the two, finally deciding to enter the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in the fall. After making the decision, I felt a sense of peace of having made the right decision. I began to understand something new about call. It can be the sense of confirmation after taking a leap of faith into the unknown.

The two years of graduate school were significant for me in terms of spiritual and personal growth. I experienced Christian community in a way that I never had before - which actually prepared me for becoming a part of this community ultimately. In the fall of my senior year my family moved to Lynchburg when my father was called to be the Executive Presbyter for the churches in Central Virginia. When I graduated I came to a city where I didn't know anyone outside my family. I found myself dealing with two issues: separation from a community of friends to whom I had grown close and once again not knowing what the future held for me. Interviews with several churches had not resulted in a job as a Christian educator, so I was feeling very frustrate and restless. I wanted to get on with my life. One way I dealt with that frustration was by walking around the city, working off my restlessness and thinking about the past two years and the future. On one of those treks I walked up Boonsboro Rd and came upon a triangular blue sign that said "Church of the Covenant, Lodge of the Fishermen, and Kum-Ba-Yah- Day Camp. I recognized the Lodge because my

brother David had brought me out here one night. I recognized Kum-Ba-Yah because of newsletters that I saw in the seminary library in Richmond. And I was somewhat familiar with Church of the Savior in Washington and knew there was some connection with Church of the Covenant. On an impulse - and those who know me well know that I don't usually act on impulse - I turned and walked down the driveway and in the front door of the Church House. (I didn't know it was a Church then). I called out a tentative "hello" and received a response from upstairs. I went up and met Bern Gooch, who was then the church secretary. I talked to her a while about possibilities for volunteering my services in some way for the summer. She mentioned several possibilities in the area; then said, "If you can wait for a few minutes, P.G. Cosby is coming to take me home. Maybe he'll have some ideas. I recognized his name because he was one of the ones responsible for my father's move to Lynchburg. He recognized my name as well. Then he said, "Well, it just so happens that we need one more camp counselor for Kum-Ba-Yah Day Camp this summer - would you be interested?" Would I be interested! This happened on a Friday, and Monday morning found me downtown where a section of the camp was held at that time. God - and P.G. had opened a door which brought me both community and at least a temporary outlet (so I thought) for my skills and energy. During that summer I had one more interview with a church. The minister and I sat outside in his car on Madison St. I listened to his questions of me and looked outside at the children with whom I had been working for the past six weeks. His focus was so far removed from the reality which I had been experiencing that I knew that there was no common ground. We parted, mutually agreeing that I was probably no the right person for the job.

This was a turning point for me. I began to entertain the possibility of remaining in Lynchburg. When camp was over, I talked to Bev about it, and he encouraged my decision to explore. Once again I had departed from my usual logical approach to decision-making. I had been trained as a church musician and a D.C.E., right? Therefore, that's what I should be looking for. Instead, here I was thinking about looking for any job I could find. One of the places Bev

mentioned was Lyn-CAG. So, on a Friday I presented myself there. After finding out that I had taken some courses in early childhood education at P.S.C.E., the interviewer sent me to talk to the director the Headstart Program. She said to me, "It just so happens that we need a teacher one of our classes. Would you be interested?" Would I be interested! Monday morning found me working with a class of four-year-olds, which I did for the next three years. Once again God opened a door and I walked through. In this way I found out that God also issues calls by creating opportunities to which one is free to respond. Vocationally, two more doors were opened over the years until I found the one that was the deepest call of all - where I am now teaching at Laurel Regional School with students who have physical and mental challenges.

Lest it seem that all this went smoothly, let me hasten to say that this is just the bare bones of the story. It took me a year to decide it was O.K. for me not to be a member of a Presbyterian church -although I still consider myself a Presbyterian. (I can now claim membership in 3 denominations Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, and Disciples of Christ). I also spent eleven years finding out that I am not called to be an administrator, when I directed a day care center! I don't count the experience as a loss, because as Elizabeth O'Connor says in her book, *Journey Inward, Journey Outward*, "Sometimes we find out what is not call for us." When I decided to become a teacher at Laurel, I had to go back to school for several years to get my teaching certificate, and working at the same time. This meant giving up for a time many of the involvements in the life of this community during that time, one of them being the Friday night coffeehouse at the Lodge of the Fishermen.

At the end of that first year when I decided it was O.K. to break with tradition, I made the decision to become an intern member. Once I decided to put my roots down in Lynchburg and Church of the Covenant, this was a logical step for me. I spent a year as an inntern member with a sponsor who, coincidentally, was on her way out of the community at the time. She provided a good balance for my idealism, yet did not try to discourage me. I remember clearly, one evening that spring we were in her kitchen talking. All of a sudden she asked me,

"Well, when are you going to become a Covenant Member?" After a moment, I replied, "I'm ready." And I made my commitment in June 1969.

In the beginning I interpreted my call to Church of the Covenant in a general way. I threw myself into almost everything. I taught church school, I worked on the Lodge staff two nights a week, I played for the Sunday service, I volunteered for activities at the Kum-Ba-Yah House downtown with neighborhood children. I very quickly became overextended. In the initial excitement of being a part of it all, it didn't matter at first. But little by little as my energy and excitement wore down, I began to discover the community warts. Then I would pull back, take stock and become less involved for a while. This cycle went on for several years and I began to feel in a rut. I remember driving home one night, feeling rather dried up and praying, "God, I need some kind of change in my life." Let me warn you about praying that kind of prayer! I fancy that God replied with a twinkle in his eye, "Well, I guess it is about time you had your mid-life crisis, my child." I won't bore you with the details, but it had the effect of turning a clam, stable, relatively rational person into someone I didn't recognize at all! It was unnerving. For the next several years it was all I could do just to "be", let alone "do".

The point I'm trying to make here is that even during the times of withdrawal and minimal involvement I did not question my basic call to this community. I have not heard God calling me elsewhere. My call is to the Church of Jesus Christ as expressed and lived out in Church of the Covenant. That has been and still is unequivocal.

However, when it has come down to the matter of how I am to live out this call, the message is not always so clear. I see my certainty about my basic commitment as gift and grace. It is not an act of will nor is it earned. It just is. But I do have struggles from time to time when I try to determine whether I am being called to a specific mission or activity. I see this as God's giving me the freedom to discover for myself what my specific gifts are. I also believe that God calls me to do that which is enjoyable and fulfilling for me once I get past the "oughts" and "shoulds" by being able to do what I most want to do to help bring in God's kingdom. Again, Elizabeth O'Connor says, "surrender to what is written into the

fabric of our lives is surrender to the will of God. . ."

A number of years ago I attended a Wellspring retreat from which I gleaned some guidelines which have been helpful to me in discerning my specific call to mission. They are in the form of questions to ponder.

1. Where do I connect or grieve for the world's pain? Phrased this way counteracts the tendency to think of call in terms of what needs doing or jumping on a bandwagon just because it's there. That question shook me when it was first posed. I couldn't have said whether or not I felt that deeply about another's pain. On further reflection, I can say that I grieve for children whose disabilities isolate them from normal interaction with society. My own early struggles to relate with my peers in school does help me to empathize with them.

2. Is the call good news for me? This is in contrast to the question of whether or not I "ought" to do it. Considered in this light, it could become heavy and burdensome. The question is whether or not I am able to put myself into the call with energy, creativity and enthusiasm. This doesn't mean that there aren't times when my call does seem burdensome. If this feeling persists, it may mean that it is time to reassess my call. Calls do change over time. This process occurred to me when I was on the Friday night coffeehouse staff. When my call to it was strong, I could go in after a day at work, feeling tired and low, and leave around on in the morning feeling energized and revitalized. I remember one night several of us were feeling so high about the evening that we went to Howard Johnson's after we closed for another hour or two! When I began to leave the Friday night coffeehouse feeling tired and low, I knew that it was no longer good news for me. I needed to reassess my call, which I did with a great deal of struggle, and knew it was time for me to move on. This had nothing to do with the mission itself, which ministered to a lot of people.

3. Is the call impossible? Do I feel inadequate? Sometimes we don't know that it is impossible. How many times have I heard someone say, "If we had known what this was going to involve, we probably wouldn't have attempted it"? I remember Gordon Cosby saying to a group of us as we were having a dedication for the beginnings of the Gateway, "I feel sorry for you all: you don't know what is

in store for you!" At the time, we laughed. On Friday nights when the staff was hurried and forgetful of the Lodge's mission, it was God's grace that allowed us to hear a patron say, "I like being here. I feel safe- or comfortable, or accepted." It is impossible for me to fully equip my students to cope with life in the few years that I have them, no matter how efficient a program I may devise. Their future is in God's hands. But I can be an instrument of caring in their lives.

As for inadequacy, during the aforementioned retreat I was talking to Gloria McClanen, who was one of the leaders, confessing the inadequacy I felt trying to be the leader and spiritual director for the Lodge Mission Group. She responded with a spark in her eye, "That's a requirement, not a liability, for leadership!" That got me back on track to remember to let God work through me and not try to carry it alone.

4. The final question is perhaps the most crucial one to me in the final analysis. "Is the call something that I must do?" That is, to say, the call won't leave me alone, no matter how I might try to resist it or put it off. The task is mine; the sense of ultimate responsibility won't go away. In recent years, I had to struggle between a sense of call to Jubilate Mission Group and the beginnings of a L'Arche home and to the beginnings of the Festival Mission Group. At first I tried to do both; then I took a leave of absence from the L'Arche board. (I did stay with Jubilate). But the L'Arche mission kept pulling me back, literally. Now with the home open and flourishing, I realize that I am a part of it. It just won't leave me alone!

Some other points I work with when considering what my call is are the following:

- Spending time in solitude and reflection are helpful in discerning a call and letting it grow. Often there is an internal process that works on it while I am focusing on other things.
- I may share my process with others in the community for confirmation, support and accountability. Often sharing what I am working with helps it become a reality; if I keep it locked inside me, I may be able to keep avoiding it.
- If the call involves something new that doesn't already exist, I can narrow the

focus to a more manageable size. For instance, when the L'Arche board was involved in the complicated decision-making of building the new house, it was more manageable for me to be involved in finding things for and helping to set up the Riverside House at the time.

-This is probably the hardest thing of all to do. Once I know what my primary call is, I may have to say "no" to other good involvements in order to give my best to that call. Of course, it depends on how involved that call is; whether I am called to one time-consuming effort or several smaller ones. But I have found that when I split myself too many different ways, I can't do justice to any of them.

-One point that I have difficulty with is that it is O.K. to fail. I am not called necessarily to be successful, but to be faithful to the call of God. This community has seen a number of missions and mission groups come and go. Some were relinquished after a time; others evolved into different or independent structures. None were without their impact on situations or persons involved. The City Gate Mission Group evolved into LCF's housing program for low income people. Romans XII Mission Group gradually disbanded as members were called to other structures, but some who were around at the time still talk about the Christmas Eve services held in the Lodge during those years.

This brings me to the point that calls will change from time to time - they don't usually remain static. It may be different levels with a mission or to a different mission altogether. Again, Elizabeth O'Connor says "A call which is valid at one time in a person's life will not necessarily be valid at another time. . .As we come to know ourselves at new depths, our values and emphasis and direction may radically change."

I want to say a final word on the relationship between call as expressed through vocation or career, and call as expressed through the church community. It may be one and the same, but most often is not. I see a need for myself to try to keep a balance. Teaching is a call for me, but so is belonging to Church of the Covenant and participating in its life. The community gives me the support and impetus to be on mission at Laurel. I need to bring back to the community my support and involvement. Each person has to work out this relationship for her or



himself. The important thing is sharing with the community where each of us is during the week so that we can image and pray for each other in our involvements.