

THE CALL

sermon preached at Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA

by Josh Hosler

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Today's readings seem to me to be all about the people God calls to be leaders. As a seminarian discerning a call to the priesthood, leadership is a topic I think about a lot. I seek leadership, I wonder about the qualities of a good leader, and sometimes I even dread leadership. We assume our leaders must have lots of know-how to do the job well. But listen closely to today's readings and you might find a counter-message about leadership. It seems that leadership has less to do with what you know than with your people skills. And it also has less to do with perfection and more to do with whom you trust—that someone being God.

Take King David, for instance. When he was still very young—maybe twelve years old?—Samuel anointed him king, but didn't tell anybody. Saul remained king of Israel for many years after that day. David, meanwhile, gained a positive reputation of his own, starting with that Goliath incident, and this made Saul very jealous. David loved King Saul and stuck with him through the king's mental illness and even when the king tried to kill him once or twice. Eventually, though, Saul brought about his own downfall, because his people skills were severely lacking. And when that happened, as we hear this morning, "all the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron" and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh ...

[God has said] it is ... you who shall be ruler over Israel.” David’s people skills had earned him a following that made his reign inevitable, the fulfillment of God’s call to him.

David has gone down in history as the ultimate Jewish king, but it’s not because he was perfect. The Bathsheba-and-Uriah incident is evidence enough of David’s moral failings. But on that occasion, David repented and recommitted himself to God. Perfection is not a requirement for a good leader. Good leaders are people who are conscientious enough to own up to their mistakes and who trust God to bring good out of a bad situation. In fact, David and Bathsheba’s son, Solomon, became the next king, and his reign marked the golden age of Israel.

Paul was another imperfect leader. In today’s reading from his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul talks about a mystical experience that happened to a friend of his—presumably, he’s speaking about himself in an intentionally humble way, so that it won’t sound like he’s bragging. Paul uses this experience to justify his call from God. I have a feeling that being humble was a challenge for Paul. After all, he had the audacity to take this strong Jewish faith in Jesus and open it up to the whole Gentile world. I have no trouble believing that was exactly what God called Paul to do. But it would take a person of sizeable ego to even think of taking on a project like that. And a large ego often doesn’t translate into the kind of people skills one needs to be a good leader.

So Paul worked hard to temper his ego with faith. God’s words to him were these: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” Paul knew that a perfect person—even if such a one were possible—could never earn the respect of common people who are all too aware of their own imperfections. So he kept reminding himself of his own weaknesses, and he even boasted about them, because they demonstrated that whatever good works Paul did, it was God who actually deserved the credit.

Even Jesus, with his divine people skills, had difficulty getting some people to follow him. Ironically, it was the people who knew him best—the residents of his own hometown—who couldn’t believe in him. And I’m not sure why that amazed Jesus so much. Local kid disappears for a few years, comes home, and suddenly he’s talking like he’s the son of God or something. But we all know him as Mary’s boy—the carpenter—and we know all his brothers and sisters. Has he lost his mind?

Yet Jesus has so many followers by this time that he’s equipping them to be leaders, to spread the Good News to more people at once. He calls his apostles to go out two by two, and to be completely dependent on the people they meet to provide for all their needs. (Incidentally, this scene always reminds me of Yoda urging Luke Skywalker to leave his light saber behind.) Jesus teaches his apostles that the people who will not receive them in all their humility don’t have ears to

hear Jesus' message anyway. And when the apostles go out, completely unprotected and unguarded, possibly with minimal know-how or people skills, but with childlike trust, they work miracles in Jesus' name.

Today, we are those apostles. We are the ones Jesus has sent out to bring the Good News that nothing can separate us from the love of God. The message of God's forgiveness is often met with resistance, with hardness of heart, and even with fear and violence. You'd think people would be happy to hear that God loves them. But people are less likely to believe the Good News when the people who bring it don't quite believe it themselves. As a matter of fact, I think that's what trips up the Christian cause most often. Even Christians with lots of book-smarts or people skills need to trust the one who granted those gifts in the first place.

Do we really believe that God loves us, supports us, sustains us, and has given us everything we need? Do you believe that you have everything you need to follow God's call to you? Have you thought of it in those terms before? Are you saying to yourself right now, "I'm not called by God. That's for priests and really, really saintly people"?

Yet here we are in this time of sabbatical at Holy Cross, looking at our own calls as a community and as individuals. We do have everything we need. We have our baptism, which is the mechanism by which we were called in the first place. At your baptism, the Holy Spirit entered you with incredible power, and a community

of faith promised to do everything in its power to help raise you in the Christian faith and life. You may not be in that same community anymore, but those people were representatives of a deeper truth: the Christians who surround you today are the ones who can support you in God's call to you now.

Your call may not be the same as it used to be. Whether it's to a certain career, or to raise a family, or simply to listen in this moment to a friend who's feeling down, God's calls to us come and go. And if you are not baptized, that doesn't mean God is not calling you. The call may well be to baptism first, and to further instructions later! We're not always prepared for a call when it comes—in fact, I'd be wary of anyone who claimed to be prepared. It takes trust to embrace a call: trust that God will equip us. There's a great bumper sticker that says, "God doesn't call the fit—God fits the called." As I go through seminary, this phrase means more to me than ever before.

This summer I'm enrolled in CPE—Clinical Pastoral Education—sometimes called pastoral boot camp for seminarians. My CPE experience is a ten-week chaplaincy internship at Goodwin House, a retirement community in Alexandria. I spend every weekday getting to know the residents, listening to them, and praying with them and for them. This has required me to slow down my usually quick pace—to bridle my energy. We also spend lots of time as a group of chaplains, sharing the conversations we've had with the residents and offering each other

feedback in a style sometimes called “care-frontation.” It’s a little uncomfortable sometimes! The CPE experience has forced me to look at myself and my people skills very honestly ... and I find myself wanting.

I never thought I was perfect, but I had no idea how far off the mark I can get. I thought I was in touch with people’s emotions, but when pressed, often I couldn’t tell you what *I’m* feeling in any given moment, let alone gauge what other people in the room might be feeling. I already knew that I can get a little uptight when I’m under stress, but my time in CPE has shed new light on a host of past failings in my life, and how most of them tie back to this exact tendency. I am also beginning to understand how often I talk about myself at the expense of getting curious about other people in all their joys, sorrows, and complexity. There are moments when I feel like I’m grieving the death of a loved one, only to discover that the person whose death I’m grieving is myself ... the old me. But as my CPE supervisor Dan Duggan is fond of saying, “You never get rid of your ‘stuff’—you just become a better student of it.”

We all go through times like this sooner or later—that is, if we are ever to grow. Like David, we fall into sin, but hopefully we repent and understand that God has forgiven us. Like Paul, we find we have a thorn in our side, something that will never go away, but which we just might learn to manage better ... and the example of which might actually be of some help to others. Like Jesus, we find

that even when we try to honor God's call, there are people close to us who don't see it and who won't be there for us. But like Jesus' apostles, we are called to just go out and do it, whether we're prepared or not, because God will be there with us in ways that we can't begin to imagine.

My call to the priesthood has taken shape over many years, and it has been spoken to me through the mouths of many people. Likewise, if you're confused about God's call to you, it may be time to listen to the voices of your community, and also to spend more time in quiet contemplation, listening for the still, small voice of God.

Whatever my call, I'll never be competent enough to do it exactly right, and neither will you. Our spiritual competence is completely dependent on God, and that's good news, because faith tells us God will not let us down. Do you believe that? If not, can you at least imagine it? That's all you need, really ... a little imagination, a sense of wonder, and a heart to know and love God. God is calling you, in all your imperfections, to grow more and more into the person you were meant to be—to become more and more yourself. Are you listening? Amen.