

January 23, 2011: CALLED AND CREDENTIALLED  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23; Psalm 37:1, 4-9  
Eileen Parfrey - Springwater Presbyterian Church

My friend Rodger Nishioka tells of growing up watching the TV show, *Wild Kingdom*. One episode stands out for him. Hundreds of seemingly identical mother elephant seals give birth to pups and then swim out into the ocean to feed, essentially abandoning their babies on shore. When they return, these mothers need to find their own pups in a sea of seemingly-identical babies. So, as they hit the shore, they call out and pause to listen for a return call. When she recognizes the sound of her pup, the mother heads in that direction, then stops again to call and listen. In this way of call-listen-advance, she locates her own pup, using a memory of sound imprinted at the birth. Rodger remembers that, as the show's narrator explained this memory imprint, his father turned to him and said, "You know, that's how it is with God. We are imprinted with a memory of God, and God is imprinted with a memory of us, and even if it takes a lifetime, we will find each other." Today, not unlike the elephant seal mothers, Jesus launches his ministry in Galilee, calling to those who belong to him. As seemingly miraculous as identical mothers and babies finding each other, Jesus' radical and demanding call to discipleship is met with a response of unconditional obedience.

When I was in college, I saw three different productions of the play, *Waiting for Godot*. I'm not proud of that, because I think it's one of the most maddening plays ever written—two hoboese, sitting by the side of the road, verbally abusing each other while they wait for the mysterious Godot to show up and give meaning to their lives. That Godot does not come is the plot, that Godot will not come is the tension, that there may not even be a Godot for which to wait is the growing realization. Peter, Andrew, James, and John were not even waiting, as far as we know, when out of nowhere comes this Not-Godot to call them and give their lives meaning.

Since ancient times, heroic stories have begun with a call. The hero receives a challenge that strikes to the very core of his or her identity, something that throws them so off-kilter that their response requires them to leave home and embark on an adventure that takes them from a focus of me, me, me to a larger context. The two bums in *Waiting for Godot* cannot shift from me, me, me. They wait for that something-from-outside (for Godot) to come and do something to them. Peter, Andrew, James and John hear a call out of ordinary, family-oriented lives of me, me, me, into a context that would throw the whole world off balance. We pray "Thy kingdom come," but do we really mean it?

Were those fishermen waiting? Did they expect Jesus' call? Was their response spur-of-the-moment? We don't know. Writer Malcolm Gladwell offers a perspective in his *New Yorker* article entitled "Small Change," in which he contrasts several social change movements. One of his examples is the 1960 Greensboro lunch counter sit-ins that helped launch the civil rights movement in the segregated South. In three days, the movement grew from justy four black students refused service at the whites-only lunch counter, to 300 black students sitting where only white people had ever sat before. By the next week, student protests were taking place in five cities. Each day a new city or three and hundreds more students were added to the movement, so that eventually 70,000 students took part all across the South. Thousands were arrested, more were radicalized, sympathizers from the North drove down to take part. And no one emailed, texted, twittered, tweeted, or liked on their Facebook page in order to get it going.

Which is what we do these days in order to get something off the ground. Tens of thousands of people click a button on their Facebook page within hours of the original posting, to show support for a cause, all from the comfort of their own home. Bone marrow donor banks spring up overnight, charities raise funds with cents-per-click initiatives, spontaneous street mobs converge within an hour, all using what we call "social media." The students who sat at the lunch counters in the South in the 60s risked beatings, arrest, lynching, kidnapping, fire bombing. For Gladwell, what distinguishes our social media revolution and its tools from what happened in Greensboro to initiate the civil rights movement, is the level of commitment and social risk. Social networks increase raw

numbers of participation by lowering the level that participation requires, but clicking support for clean water in Darfur while you sit at your desk is not the same as being chased by armed and angry men in pickup trucks. And it might not accomplish as much, either.

The type of call that gives meaning to our lives is the one that calls us out of our *se/ves* and into a larger context. Last week I helped with the Clackamas County homeless count. My assignment was to a day shelter in Clackamas called Father's Heart. One of their projects gives new and gently-worn boots to men trying to get back to work. While I was there, they got a call from a man who complained that he wanted *new* boots, "none of them used boots." They graciously explained that they give what they've got, and the man hung up. We were all troubled by his complaining, because "something" is better than nothing. But after 3 hours of interviewing homeless guys about where they sleep at night, it finally struck me that sometimes complaining is the only dignity left to a person.

Just to be clear, though, this type of complaining for dignity is *not* what the apostle Paul chided the Corinthian community about. For many homeless folks, the right to express preferences is proof that they are still human beings. That's not the problem in the church. Paul wants Corinth to transcend complaining and divisiveness in order to build community. It's a sign of spiritual maturity, he says, and he bases this on the foolishness of the cross. Not the self-denying humble pie cross of martyrdom and taking on responsibilities that appropriately belong to others. Paul means self-giving sacrifice like Jesus' cross, a foolishness that leads one to care for others and work for reconciliation and peace. That kind of cross foolishness. His concern is for a type of commitment that extends beyond self-interest and one's immediate family, a response requiring more of us than a mouse click.

I feel like I'm harping on the same subject, week after week. But this is really what keeps coming up in the lectionary, as if it's a Biblical theme, as if it's what it means to be a disciple and follower of Jesus. We're called, and that call requires commitment and giving up the notion that we're the only one standing against the injustices of the world and if only people would listen to *me*, things would be set right, dagnabit! The call is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. We do that by our lives—by how we live. The most authentic proclamation, at least according to Jesus the night he was betrayed, is our life as community. Complaining like the homeless guy at Father's Heart is as easy and convenient as a mouse click. But as the Body of Christ, we have more than that on which to base our dignity. We have been called "the beloved of his heart" by Jesus, called to proclaim his gospel, equipped for our life together. It is a memory that was imprinted on our hearts by none other than God. Beloved of God! Listen. Respond to *that* call.

[Return Home](#)