

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
18th January 2009
Epiphany 2 B
John 1:43-51

I want to talk with you today for a few moments about vocation.

And by this I don't mean, nor do I exclude, a sense of calling toward ordained ministry.

What I mean by vocation is very nearly described by Presbyterian Frederick Buechner when he wrote, "Vocation is that place where our great joy meets God's great need."

Our great joy meeting God's great need.

It seems to me that this is what we as a church, and we as individuals have as our Christian calling. Jesus found Philip and said, "Follow me." Philip told Nathaniel, "Come and see."

They didn't know where this man from Nazareth was headed, they didn't know what he was really up to, they didn't know what sort of plan he had for them – he just said, "Follow me."

I told you this story about Jesus last May, but I think it bears repeating. It seems that Jesus ascended into heaven to sit at God's right hand. As he appeared, the angel Gabriel saw that Jesus' body bore the scars of his crucifixion. "It must have been really hard for you, Jesus – it must have hurt terribly," said Gabriel. "Yes, it did." "So what happens now," asked Gabriel. "Well, I left Peter, James, John, Mary, and the others in charge of the message," responded Jesus. "My, that's a heavy burden you've left them – all that message about peace and loving the enemy and caring for the sick and the poor. What if they get tired?" "Well, they might," murmured Jesus. "Well, I assume you've got a back-up plan," said Gabriel. "Nope, no backup. It's up to them."

You know and I know that there is a lot of pain and suffering in the world. There's a lot of pain and suffering right here in Michigan. People are sick and can't afford to see a doctor. People are losing their jobs and their homes. Retired folks are worried about their pensions and their 401k's.

God's great need is right here and it's right now. Yes, to be sure, God has enormous needs well beyond Mount Pleasant – there is unbearable suffering in

the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. There is a pandemic, there is war, there is poverty so extreme we can barely imagine it. God needs have no boundaries.

And yet – and yet... Millions have found a vocation. Millions of people, day in and day out, 24/7, open their hearts and reach out their hands in compassion. Sometimes they are very clear that they are serving God in Christ. Sometimes they are very clear that they are serving Mohammed. Sometimes they are very clear that they are serving no god whatsoever – and yet their very sense of brotherhood compels them to fill a need they've seen.

It's still a vocation.

It is a vocation because it is a setting aside of self in the name of justice, in the name of compassion, and sometimes in the name of God in Christ.

Just Friday night I witnessed, as did many of you, people with a vocation. Whether they realize or acknowledge it or not, the volunteers for the John H. Goodrow Fund have a vocation: They are finding great joy in meeting God's great need. People wrote checks with a smile – having the winning bid for Elizabeth Brockman's awesome granola made at least one Senior Warden nearly giddy.

Sally Goodrow herself had a feeling years ago: The ministry of the Goodrow Fund must not be allowed to die with her husband – there is too much need in this community and there is too much generosity in this parish.

Our great joy meeting God's great need.

This past fall Diana Clapp spent literally hours packing up Thanksgiving baskets so that families might enjoy a traditional American holiday meal of roast turkey and all the trimmings. For Diana and George, whether they acknowledge it or not, great joy has met great need.

Our Evangelism Committee sensed a vacuum of spiritual education in our community – and thus was born the Center for Christian Spirituality. People have attended to enrich their prayer life, to learn about Celtic spirituality, to spend some time quietly with God. And those of us who have witnessed the workshops, seminars, and quiet days have seen our great joy meeting God's great need.

The examples abound. People hearing the call of Christ, people willingly responding when Jesus says, "Follow me."

God calls each and every one of us. God calls us to newness of life, to a life of justice and freedom and mercy, a life of caring for our neighbor, whomever he or she may be, a life of gratitude and a life of service. We don't always want to *hear* that call, and sometimes we pretty successfully shut it out. Like the child who presses her hands against her ears and screams, "I can't hear youuuuuu!"

As Americans, we're usually very reluctant to talk about our faith. We have no problem sharing news about the latest restaurant we found – how good the food was, how excellent the service, how reasonable the prices. But how easy is it for us to talk about our relationship with God? How often do we talk about our experience on Sunday at church? Probably not very often. Probably not often enough.

Faith, politics, and sex. We're not supposed to talk about those in polite company.

But I suggest to you that it's time to stop being shy about your faith and our church! It's time to stop being embarrassed to say you're an Episcopalian! Our religion gets a very bad rap from time to time. Saying you're a Christian causes some people to put all kinds of labels on you: Right wing. Bigot. Fundie. Creationist. *And that's simply not fair and it's simply not right!* Because although some of us may be some of those things, the Episcopal Church is far too big to impose limits like those.

We need to reclaim our faith. It's time to *take back our Christianity!* It's time... to be unafraid... to say, "Come and see." When you receive our Annual Report, you will notice that our average Sunday attendance last year dropped by two from 2007. Now this is not shocking news or cause for anxiety, because our membership has grown a bit and our record keeping is becoming more accurate. But this statistic might cause you to wonder, "What am I doing to grow St. John's Episcopal Church? How can I exemplify *my* vocation so that when someone asks me about my church life I can say, 'Come and see?'"

Jesus called Philip who called Nathaniel. Jesus called me and Jesus calls you. "Follow me," he says. "Follow me and learn and then go into the world and be my hands. Don't give up, don't ever give up. Match the huge need of my children with an audacious generosity. Bring them all to me and I will give them comfort – but *you* must give them food, *you* must give them spiritual nourishment, *you* must help them be sheltered and protected."

Jesus Christ calls us beyond our boundaries and beyond our comfort levels. But faith calls us to live life on the edge.

And when we respond to the call of Christ we receive joy.

“Follow me,” said our Lord. “Be my hands and meet my need.”

Amen.