

Saying Yes to the Call

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Jay Sidebotham on Sunday, January 27, 2008 at
The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest.*

When I arrived at seminary in 1986, I was struck with the variety of things students did before they enrolled. There were former actors, lawyers, bankers, stock brokers, even one stand-up comedian. I was the only person who'd worked in advertising. For that reason, I got questions not only about how I heard a call, but how I responded, or as today's collect states it, how I was able to answer the call readily. The fact is, as my wife will tell you, I didn't answer the call readily. I took a while to think about it, to resist it, sometimes wondering if the call was a wrong number. My response was a journey at 5 mph, a step at a time. In conversations with others about their sense of call, I've found that's often the case.

The question of call, a theme of the season of Epiphany, is a good theme for a day when we have a church meeting. It's worth noting that the Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, combines two words: the prefix "ek" which suggests "out of" and the verb "kalew" which means to call. Put it all together, it says that people in the church are called out of normal routine into a distinctive community meant to make a difference in the world. As members of a church, we share this: Everybody here has a call from God. I have a call. You have a call. The question du jour: How will we say yes to that call?

Maybe I should back up and ask: What is the call? What calls you to this place? Are we called here because we seek meaning and think maybe Jesus can offer it? Do we see people around us living life without a compass, and come hoping to find direction? Is it a desire to make a difference? Is it that we want to know which way to go? If any of that is calling you, then today's gospel is right up your alley, as it centers on two words Jesus says to his disciples when he calls them: Follow me. Jesus didn't say to his disciples believe this dogma, obey these rules, sign this contract, fill out this form,

get this friend to recommend you, pass this standardized test, give this amount of money. He just says: Follow me. Trust me. Walk with me. Join me on the journey. It's an invitation to a relationship, an invitation to a way of life, which is why the first Christians were called people of the way. The miracle of the gospels is that disciples did it. They left fishing boats and tax collection desks and followed. He's calling to us to find our own way to do the same thing.

I bet there were mornings when the disciples woke up and said: This is not the cruise ship I signed up for. What have I gotten myself into? I bet there were moments when disciples got on each other's nerves, when it was only will power that made them stick it out. It's like any relationship to which we're committed, it's a daily walk. We choose it daily, daily weighing the cost and the promise. Knowing it's not always easy, let me suggest ways we can say yes to the call to follow Jesus, practices you may already be practicing, or perhaps some new ways to think about your spiritual journey.

The first is to develop some individual, personal daily spiritual practice that helps us take the journey a day at a time, some practice that reminds us that a life of faith calls for daily attention to our relationship with God. It might be a few minutes of silence in the morning or at night. It might be a prayer list offered each day, maybe when you ride the train, with the names and concerns on your heart. It might be transforming, indeed sanctifying an exercise regime so that instead of plugging in the ipod or watching ESPN on the treadmill, you thank God for the gifts given you, or ask God to show you how to exercise your gifts. It might be reading a psalm, or a journal written in response to a piece of scripture. It might be coming here for Morning Prayer. We follow, we say yes

to the call when each day we nurture a relationship with God in Christ.

The second way we follow is by discovering and nurturing spiritual relationships with people around us, in particular saying yes to a worshipping community. It means showing up, even if we don't feel like it. We all, even clergy, have moments when we don't feel like showing up. It matters that we are physically present to worship, not so much to be entertained or even enlightened but to make our offering, to thank and praise God together, and in doing so to find strength for the journey. And it's not just about attending worship. It's about spiritual relationships, spiritual accountability, discovering ways to know and be known. Saying yes to being part of some small group where you can grow. This church is full of those opportunities. With Lent starting, you might want to give one of them a try. One of the best ways I know to do that is through the Alpha program, beginning this Tuesday. At Alpha tables, faithful community develops, a sharing deeper than can take place at coffee hour, or in line at Starbucks, or at a cocktail party. We are called to travel with other disciples along the way. How will we say yes to that call?

Finally, following is a matter of saying yes to service. Jesus said that he came not to be served but to serve. If following Jesus means doing what he did, then we each are called to serve. We live in a world that needs serving. In today's gospel, when Jesus tells Peter: I will make you fish for people, it was a call to service, to use his gifts for the sake of others. A parishioner in Washington who worked as a high powered urban lobbyist heard a sermon on this passage and remarked to me afterward: I have no clue about fishing, but here's how I would translate that text: Follow me and I will make you network for Christ. She got the point: Jesus takes who we are and uses us, fulfills us, lets us sing our song, gifts and flaws, enthusiasm and reticence. This church offers many opportunities for service, both on site, and off campus. As we welcome new Vestry and thank retiring members, I'm mindful of the quiet and thankless ways that

Vestry members use their gifts and training for the sake of God's work. People who know how to read financial statements, to make furnaces work, to manage databases, to read architectural drawings, all using those gifts in the name of Jesus. We have great gifts among the people of this congregation. We're called to put those gifts to work. How will we say yes to that call?

In the spirit of full disclosure, as you hear the call, and answer it readily, you won't stay the same. That promise of transformation is what discipleship is about. Another disclaimer: Once we start this journey, it may not be possible to limit the impact on our lives. It will shape the way we parent, the way we work, the way we spend time and money. One more disclaimer: There's no promise any of this will be easy, entertaining, or fun. It will be worth it, but it may not be easy. But along with the cost, there is promise that there is no one and no situation beyond God's reach, that God's call comes to each one of us, and that God can use each one of us.

At the annual meeting, I'll talk about what the call means for our congregation: how as a church we can say yes to the call to be an inviting, nurturing, serving community. Right now, I want to focus on what it means for you and me in each of our spiritual journeys. Will we follow? The answer matters because the needs in our world are great. It matters because the gifts represented in this congregation are extraordinary. I can't wait to see what God will do with them in the coming year, when taking it a day at a time, traveling together, growing in service, we say yes to the call, and answer the call readily.