

Equipped for the Job

Text: Ephesians 4:11-16

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on October 10, 2021

We left off last week with a ringing phone, and I want you to remember that. Everybody has a phone that is ringing off the hook...God is calling us, both individually and collectively, and wants to be in relationship with us. The notion of calling is not first about ordained ministry, work in the church, or even any kind of work or vocation at all. Calling is first and foremost about relationship. God wants to be in relationship with us, and that's the primary offer that comes with that ringing phone.

Accepting that offer of relationship is where Christian life begins, and we mark it with the covenant of baptism, which we did a few minutes ago. It's just the very beginning of a partnership with something beyond ourselves; a spiritual reality that we'll explore and understand at ever deepening levels across the stages of our lives. We know from the start that the name of that reality is love; but what that looks like in our unique life and circumstance will be discovered only through living into it as we keep the Spirit of love as our North Star.

But that initial calling to a relationship with God is the doorway to an expanded view of reality where we re-discover what we knew almost instinctively as young children: we are one part of a vast and interconnected web of relationships that become heaven when woven together in love and hell when those threads are severed by hate. More specifically, we realize that somewhere in that vast network of connection, each of us has a role to play—to become a weaver who can serve and protect that living web. It is God's web—the web of love—and we are its stewards.

Deep within ourselves we know it's there. It's the pull for people wanting to go into space and look back at the world; it's the wardrobe into Narnia and Alice through the looking glass; it's the fascination with life on other planets and the allure of the Star Trek mission "to boldly go where no man has gone before." It's Frodo leaving the Shire for a world beyond his imagining and the drive of the physicist to determine the origin of all things, only to discover that she knows less at the end of her career than she did at the beginning. All of those impulses come from the same source—the ringing phone of God calling, inviting us to step over the threshold and see as God sees in order to learn to love as God loves.

Once we see it, everything changes, which is why people talk about it with strong metaphors like being born again or "I was blind, but now I see." With the new perspective there is often an urgent feeling to dash into the world and figure out what this new understanding means for how we conduct our lives. The conversation shifts from the ringing phone to the question of what comes next.

A common mistake at this point is to get so excited about the new journey that we rush onto the road without packing so much as a toothbrush. It's easy to do. Once we're able to see how everything and everyone is connected to everything else, we can see all the work that needs to be done. We know now that God has called us, and are so eager to help that we rush to do the job without the training and equipment we need.

Last fall and winter we focused on spiritual growth, the fruit of the Spirit, and how to cultivate both in our lives. When we first talked about calling last month, I told you that while I heard God's call to

enter ordained ministry when I was fourteen years old, I was 35 before I was fully prepared to lead a congregation. In the intervening 21 years, I absorbed everything I could about spirituality, Christianity, and local church life across multiple denominations; culminating in formal academic training in seminary. And, even so, I read some of the sermons I preached in those early days and want to go back to the church and say, "I'm so sorry. I meant well."

Once Paul saw the world he had been missing, he had to leave the limelight for 14 years before God could actually deploy him on his first missionary journey. Moses had to tend sheep for 40 years before he was ready, at 80 years old, to walk up to Pharaoh and say, "Let my people go." We're all at different stages of the relationship. Some are just hearing the phone for the first time and wondering if they should answer. Some have a sense of direction, and are taking first steps, others have been in training for a while and are sensing that it's time for a more substantial role in God's work.

But wherever you are, the place many, many people get stuck is in understanding what it means for God to have a plan for our lives or just how specific the thing we call "God's will" really is. For a short and fabulous introduction to that, and more than I can put in a sermon, I recommend a book by Rev. Leslie Weatherhead called, simply, *The Will of God*. Rev. Weatherhead was the pastor of a London church during WWII, and the book came from a series of sermons he preached about the struggles of his congregation, when their church was bombed into oblivion during the war. *The Will of God* is now a spiritual classic, still in print, and you don't need a degree in theology to read and understand it. Leslie Weatherhead, *The Will of God*.

I won't try to summarize it here, except by telling you about a woman a couple of decades ago who came to see me with a dilemma. She was changing jobs and had two different opportunities in front of her. She told me she had been praying for some time about which thing God wanted her to do, but couldn't get any sense of direction. She wanted help in discerning God's will.

She was a bit taken aback when I suggested, as Rev. Weatherhead might have, that maybe she wasn't sensing a direction because God didn't actually care which job she took. That maybe God's will in this case only went as far as wanting her to use her gifts in the way that she most wanted. In other words, suppose God's will was simply for her to be happy and satisfied in her work and, within the broad parameters of being in loving service to the world, the details were up to her.

In many, many quarters there is a sense that God has every minute of our lives all planned out, and our job is just to figure out the pre-ordained next step for us. Really? Who wants a boss like that? It's the micromanager of our nightmares, or the parent who can't let a child grow up; yet we somehow think God runs the world that way. That's not how it works. God turns over management of the whole world to human beings by the end of the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. I sometimes wonder if that was wise; but the God of the Bible is not a God who sweats the small stuff.

Every now and then there's a very particular job for which God selects a very particular person; but most of the time, the rules are as St. Augustine once famously layed them out: "Love God and do as you please." Because if you truly love God, that will lead to love of neighbor and love of self and all the rest is gravy. When the woman who came to see me finally understood that God simply wanted her to use her gifts in a way that was enjoyable and meaningful to her, she had no problem picking which job she wanted.

Her issue was similar to a problem I had for a long time. As a child, I imagined God's calling for me would be hard and demand great sacrifice. Fact check: True. But what I didn't understand for a long time was that, because God was preparing me from birth for the job, the work would also be something that I loved and found highly rewarding. It would be something that I was really good at, and I would get to pick which of many forms my calling might take.

I was totally prepared to suck it up and go off into a snake-infested swamp. But, like with the woman in my office, I was actually shocked by the suggestion that what I liked to do would even matter. It was hard to see the opportunities in front of me, because they weren't awful. And that's totally crazy, if you believe as I do that God is love. I mean, giving someone a job they hate and don't have the skills for isn't even good management, let alone loving.

With those misunderstandings out of the way, figuring out our calling is so much easier. Just by looking within we can find the clues to the work God is calling us to do at any and every stage of our spiritual journey. The things we love doing and the things we're good at are evidence of the divine preparation we have already been given; all that's left is to keep honing those skills and find an outlet for them when we're ready. The only thing we have to add to that mix is the question of what the world needs, because God's calling is always to something bigger than ourselves. It's there at the intersection of what we love, what we're good at, and what the world needs that our calling comes into focus, allowing us to spot the opportunity when it comes up.

As it turns out, that's true at every stage of life. Our calling will always be the intersection of what we love, what we're good at, and what the world needs; but each of those three things can change across the ages and stages of our lives. An elective we take on a lark in college might spark a new interest that leads to a changed major and career. The climate crisis facing the world today might lead the plant-lover away from owning a garden shop to running a lab to figure out how to grow food in extreme environments. Our changing physical abilities as we age might move us from swinging a hammer or playing soccer to mentoring a child, writing a book, or starting a charitable foundation.

The trifecta of what we love, what we're good at, and what the world needs can be combined in many, many ways; and, most of the time, the specific form it takes is totally up to us. Can we make bad choices? Yep. I've made many, and anyone here old enough to make choices has, too. A bad choice might derail a particular opportunity, but remember that our calling is not primarily about the job; it's about the relationship, and the God of Jesus Christ will never bail on us. In my 62 years, God has sometimes been thrilled with my choices and has sometimes had to order a cleanup on aisle 5; but I have always had God's help, acceptance, and love in learning and moving forward to the next opportunity.

While most of the calls of my life have been general; occasionally there have been specific ones. The latest one began in March of 2020. As the pandemic surged and churches everywhere were tossed out of their buildings and into chaos, God said, "Go back." And, less than two weeks before I would have signed on as the pastor of a UCC church in New Hampshire, God pinged Bishop Devadhar, who literally called me on the phone on June 18, 2020, to make sure I got a more specific message. He said, "Crawford."

There have been very few times across my life when God has hit the override button on my choices; even when I was about to choose badly. For reasons I don't yet know, it was important that I not go back into just any church, but that I come here. And because I was called to a specific church; I believe it's not just my calling, but ours. As much as we have struggled; and while God also has callings for each of you in other areas of your lives; there is something that we are being called to do here, together, at Crawford. There's a calling for Crawford as a congregation that needs my particular life's experience to fulfill and there's a calling for me that can only be accomplished with the unique gifts that each of you brings.

Do I know what that is? Nope. Not yet. But I know God has not only called me here, but you as well. And, together, we're going to figure it out. Amen.