

**“A call from God?” a sermon preached Sunday evening 21 August 2016 at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright.**

Presbyterians can be coy about claiming God’s involvement in their lives. We have a sense of our own limits, the narrowness of our perspectives. We know the history of times people claimed they were doing the work of God when in later generations it became evident they were not: slavery, apartheid, various mission interventions, supposedly just wars.

Can you think of others?

In many of our churches are the words – “For God, King and Country” and now we are much less likely to put them together. So we have this sense of wanting to be careful about making claims because in the fullness of time those claims may be shown to be wrong.

Part of this arises, also, from our valuing of the otherness of the God, the sovereignty of God, which is a major theme of Reformed theology. Karl Barth spoke of God as the wholly other, because he imagined that the coming kingdom of God was going to be so categorically different that we could not imagine it. It was wholly other from what we now experience. It was a world without war and injustice and inhumanity, a world of harmony and balance. It was not just a stretching of the present into the future. Remember he was writing in the context of a nation that saw itself as Christian and yet propelled the world into World War One, supported by its greatest theological teachers and leaders. So this sense of the otherness of God makes us coy about bringing God down to our level.

By comparison, as an example there are churches that claim greater intimacy with God, who are inclined to close the gap between humanity and God. They put emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, the closeness of God, the ability of God to break through to us and our ability to recognise the voice of God, so they are much more likely to speak of God saying this to them, or that to them.

What other phrases do people use that suggest intimacy with God or a close relationship with God?

This same struggle between otherness and intimacy affects how we approach this question – what is a call from God? Is this a call from God or is it my fanciful imagination?

We are today very conscious of how narrow is our perspective on things. We have much more awareness of the wideness of the world, through our studies, through international media, through people of different culture and faith who live alongside us. I was struck last week to hear Tim Shadbolt say that the Vietnam War was the first televised war and if

World War One had been televised it would have ended quickly. Seeing soldiers on both sides being killed by the thousands in one day would have aroused horror and opposition to war.

Yet the idea of the call of God on our lives remains central in the Christian life.

I gave up law because the church and I thought God was calling me to ministry.

People take up law because they believe God is calling them to law.

People are ordained as elders and deacons because the church believes God is calling them to these roles.

A sense of call, affirmed by the church, is what gives us motivation, animation, perseverance, the capacity to sacrifice. It's at the basis of how the church organises itself – around people responding to the call of God as affirmed by the church. A sense of call means we do not calculate, if I give up this, I will get that. A sense of call is different to making decisions on the basis of advancement or career or what it will do for us. The language of call is entirely other focused.

Not that we ever lose, nor must we lose, the capacity to question our call.

When I was a boy I wanted to be a bus driver, and I have sometimes thought, when I see the lined pews in church, that I am essentially doing what I wanted to do but in a different way - I am sure there is some psychology there that was part of the process. And how often have we seen people sense a call somewhere, only to find that when they arrive, or when they respond, it is not what they were called to after all.

Have you ever had that experience?

*"There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest"*

Amid all this complexity, and all the humming and hating, and all the wondering, important as it is in the call process, I am more inclined to put the emphasis on taking the risk, because lack of courage, lack of commitment, in our age, seems to be costing us too much in countering injustice and inequality, for example. And it means people never really live to the full, with conviction and energy.

So what is a call from God, recognising the complexity of what I have said?

Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian minister in the US, a writer and speaker and spoke at my commencement at Princeton.

*"By and large a good rule for finding out is this: the kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. ... The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (118-19).*

Parker Palmer said that calling is what you cannot not do.

That happened to me. I enjoyed the law, very much. I did not want to leave the law. There was no logical reason to leave the law. And my minister, Owen Baragwanath, said ... Kerry do not go into the ministry if you can avoid it. That was exactly the question ... there came a time when I could not avoid it, because the question kept coming back, the unease just kept growing.

Palmer encourages people with vocation questions to "let your life speak." Buechner writes says: "Listen to your life."

*"See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace"*

Listen to your life, Buechner insists. In the exciting peaks as well as in the deep, dark valleys. Even, perhaps, in the monotony. Where are those moments of happy tears? Where are the moments of surprise laughter?

Pay attention, Buechner insists. Pay attention to *those* moments. Because they are telling you something deeply important about yourself. Even more, such moments are whispering something about the kind of work God has given your life to do.

Buechner says that the way to listen to your life is to follow your feet.

*"When you wake up in the morning, called by God to be a self again, if you want to know who you are, watch your feet. Because where your feet take you, that is who you are" (The Alphabet of Grace).*

To stop with introspection is to miss something important.

*"If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing cigarette ads, the chances are that you've missed requirement (b)"(Wishful Thinking, 118-19).*

After looking inward, the Christian thinking about vocation and calling must look outward. Must look at the world in its most honest moments, at the nightly news with the sound turned off, at the world in all its pain and anguish and deep hunger and ask, ***How can my deep gladness touch this?***

As Buechner puts it:

*"Think about the work of your hands, the book that of all conceivable things you have chosen to add to the world's pain. Live in the needs of the day" (The Alphabet of Grace, 40).*

The early church was clear there were some things to which God did not call people. God did not call people, for example, to be soldiers of the empire. At that time, soldiers could not belong to the church, because of the nature of the empire.

Buechner says it is not an exact science.

*Of his own principle he says, this will get you started. But don't be so distracted by this way of thinking about calling that you miss the One who calls when the real call comes.*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says

The One who calls is not a God who creates and then leaves us to figure it out on our own, but a living Lord who calls us anew, daily, to himself.

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