

Who ya gonna call?

Associate Pastor Adam M.L. Tice
Feb. 14, 2010

I had it pretty well ingrained in me in seminary that I am generally not to preach about myself. Preaching, as one of my professors liked to joke, is “talkin’ about JESUS.” The rest of the sermon is measured by that standard. So the occasional personal anecdote can be useful, but the preacher has to remember that her sharing is not the purpose of the sermon. I’m sure many of you have heard sermons that reflect more on the preacher than on God.

So I admit to some difficulty in preparing for this sermon. As many of you know, the Pastorate and Church Council have initiated a request to our conference for my ordination. Cindy encouraged me to share with the congregation a bit of my sense of call to ministry and ordination. Because I’m not sure how to do that without talking a lot about myself, I wasn’t really looking forward to that opportunity. So then these two passages of “call” popped up in the lectionary on my Sunday to preach. I emailed Sara on Tuesday that I was resisting the idea of preaching on call, so that probably meant I ought to. Then, that weekend, Snowpocalypse Part I struck, and I was off the hook.

It was nice to have that extra weekend, plus this past week of being cooped up by Son of Snowpocalypse, to keep thinking about this sermon. Why was I having difficulty figuring out how to talk about this?

I think there are a few good reasons. The first is that Hyattsville has a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the idea of pastoral “authority,” especially as a lay-led and driven congregation. It was a congregation started by lay people and has always placed the bulk of authority in lay leadership. The role of the pastor in that mix has changed, with some pastors overstepping the congregation’s perception of authority and some with all vestiges of pastoral identity stripped from them such that they were essentially “ministry coordinators” rather than Hyattsville Mennonite Church

pastors. I am still new to this congregation and to this urban area. I'm still learning the culture. If you think about it, I'm the first pastor since the early 90s to move here from the outside — I don't have the benefit that Joe and Cindy did of being part of the culture prior to my call here. As such, I'm still finding out what being a pastor in the context of Hyattsville means.

In addition, the people of this congregation come from many different backgrounds — Mennonite, Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, agnostic, etc., in addition to national and cultural backgrounds. Even within the so-called “ethnic” Mennonite cohort, we've got all sorts — Russian, Swiss, German, Dutch, Indonesian, African... each with its own understanding of what a pastor ought to be. For some folks, a pastor is primarily a preacher. For others, a prophet or teacher. For some, the role is defined in pastoral care. There are as many expectations of what a pastor ought to be in this congregation as there are people. And I promise you that if you have an assumption about how I ought to act or behave that you haven't expressed to me, I will probably not live up to that expectation.

All that said, I'm grateful for the supervision of Cindy, the pastorate and church council as I've navigated growing into this role. They've helped me learn the intricacies of this congregation and have provided clear and useful guidance in my various roles.

The other difficulty in talking about call is trying to sort out what “call” means in the first place. The most obvious answer is that “Call” is God's vocational direction for us. In fact, the root of the word “vocation” carries the same meaning — a spoken declaration of direction. But I think it is a problem that we've come to associate the word “vocation” primarily with “job.” North American white Protestant culture especially places a great emphasis on “work” as vocation. Our job is where we find value, worth and identity. As such, many first encounters with strangers begin with “What do you do?”

But I think there is something deeper about this idea of “call.” I think it is less about

finding out what we should do and more about finding out who we are. We are not called simply into a job, but rather we are called into a *self*. My thinking is that happy people are those for whom job and self intersect.

That is where I find myself now. I have felt God and my various communities calling me as a pastor — not simply as a profession, but as a part of my identity. What I have learned from observing my dad in his time between pastorates is that just because someone is not currently a professional, they do not cease to be a pastor. I believe that whether I am serving a congregation or not, I will somehow be a pastor. And I have the great blessing of that identity lining up with a job description. Serving here at Hyattsville these last two years has been an incredible blessing. This really is the place where my identity and my profession can intersect. You have allowed me to use the gifts and skills that I've developed over the years, and you've given me space to stretch into new areas of ministry.

I confess, though, that there is one area in which I feel that coming here has not lived up to our expectations. We were told the weather would be much better here than in Indiana.

I do have some fears and anxieties in pursuing my calling as a pastor. This isn't a job for the faint of heart. Imagine having 110 bosses that you have to present to every week. Imagine going into a career where you are told that it takes about five years to really settle into a position and church community, but the average tenure is about six years. And imagine the expectation that your job and your identity are one in the same — what happens if you lose the job?

As you can guess, I did not make the decision to be a pastor lightly, nor do I take ordination lightly. It was through much self-exploration and discernment with friends and community that I pursued this vocation. I also trust the discernment of the search committee that brought me here initially and of you all for your vote that offered me this position.

I need your help as I continue in this role. I will need your support and prayers as I go through the ordination process with the conference. I will need your direction, guidance and grace as I continue to grow into this role. I will need your patience as I continue to learn your strange city ways.

I thank God for all of you. I have heard too many stories of first pastorates that haven't gone well; of poor matches between pastor and congregation; of associates who don't receive support from lead pastors. I am incredibly grateful for what I've found here at Hyattsville. Thank you for allowing me to be your associate pastor.

My preaching prof would probably be pretty annoyed with me by now — so a few final words about the gospel passage for today. What strikes me about the story of Jesus calling Peter is that Jesus knows what Peter is capable of better than Peter himself. He knows who Peter is and what he can do. He gives Peter the instructions to go out into deep water. Despite his doubt, Peter goes. This is what call is — trusting that God knows me well enough to go with me out into deep water.

Now, Peter wouldn't be my first choice for a model of ministry. In the Gospel accounts, he is constantly goofing up, saying the wrong thing and getting on Jesus' nerves. He winds up going so far as denying his relationship with Jesus. But perhaps we should take those missteps as evidence of God's grace — that even when Peter was walking on water and lost his confidence, Jesus was there to hold onto him. And in this story, Peter proclaims his unworthiness to stand in Jesus' presence. But Jesus knows who Peter is, and he knows what he is capable of. Jesus was willing to go out into the deep water with him and was willing to make Peter a pillar of the church. If Jesus can use Peter, then surely he can use me.