

## Martin Luther King, Jr. and Our Sense of Call

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January 19, 2020

I Corinthians 1:1-9 and John 1:29-42

“Tell me about your sense of call...” In the Presbyterian ordination process, that question was asked of me about a million times. It was asked by the Session of my home church as they determined whether to recommend me to the presbytery for consideration. It was asked by what was then called the presbytery Candidates Committee, as they determined whether to accept the Session recommendation. It was asked by the presbytery itself, a whole bunch of times. It was asked by several seminary admissions officers. It was asked by a psychologist as part of the screening process. It was asked by members of a PNC – a Pastor Nominating Committee – at a tiny church in Chicago, and has been asked by PNCs since, including yours, a little less than a year ago.

“Sense of call” is a funny term. Sometimes a call makes no sense at all. That is true for ministers, but it is also true, I presume, for anything we sense we are called to do – our work, our relationships, our commitments. “Why am I doing this?” can have a very particular take, but it can also have a “meta” take. “*Why* am I doing this?” we ask ourselves. “*Why* am I doing *this*?” Because we are called to it, whether that call makes sense or not.

In this case, a “sense” of call is more than a feeling, but it includes our feelings, perceptions, impulses, discernments, prayers, inputs from others, so that the place where we land feels right, if not always sensible.

One of the gifts our tradition has made to the world is the reminder that we all have senses of call. A call is never an exclusively ministerial thing – heaven forbid! Sometimes it’s about the work we do for compensation, a career. But sometimes not, which is why we should avoid conflating calling and career, so that what we do does not slide too easily into who we are. Perhaps our call is exercised when we are away from work, in a variety of ways, as a volunteer, perhaps. Or perhaps our call is worked out – in part at least – in our professional lives – teachers and nurses and accountants and police officers and factory workers.

You will hear me talk about call a great deal, and you will also hear words like “vocation” and “gifts.” They are interrelated. All are called. All are gifted. All have vocations, vocations being the places where we live out our call and utilize our gifts.

We get a strong sense of that as Paul begins his first letter to the little church in Corinth. First, Paul confirms that he has been called to be an apostle. Then the church in Corinth is told by Paul that they are called to be saints. Then he tells them that they have been called into the fellowship of Christ. That’s three “calls” in just a handful of verses, which means we should pay attention.

The Greek word is rightly translated “call,” but it can also mean “invite,” which indicates that God’s call seeks a response, a kind of RSVP. If we think we are not worthy, if we think we are not called, if we are pondering saying “no” to the invitation, Paul reminds us that we are “not lacking in any spiritual gift.” This call, therefore, is not ever about our credentials, our experiences, our portfolio, our polling numbers, and always about the God who issues the invitation. We are called, we are invited to respond, and we have every qualification, every spiritual gift, to say “yes.”

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John the Baptist is kind of hanging out with some of his disciples, his followers. We don’t know what that means, followers and disciples, what status, job description, compensation, if any at all. Jesus walks by, and John identifies him as the “lamb of God.” John’s followers, his disciples, are instantly and intently curious, so they follow Jesus. I am reminded of an African-American spiritual: “I have decided to follow Jesus;/ I have decided to follow Jesus;/ I have decided to follow Jesus;/ No turning back, no turning back.”

The disciples follow Jesus. “What are you looking for?” It really is THE question, isn’t it? What are you looking for? They pursue the conversation. He said to them, “Come and see.” What are you looking for? U2 sings, “I still haven’t found what I am looking for.” And Jesus simply says, “come and see.”

We search, we look, we are hungry, for something, for meaning, for hope, for connection, for purpose. We do not know the disciples’ contexts, but we resonate with them and their quest. What are you looking for? Something about that moment, that invitation – who Jesus is, what he offers – draws them in, and draws us in, resonates with our deepest sense of call.

Who knows what those disciples thought they were getting into? My hunch is that they could not even have come close to imagining where the next three years would take them, from the highest of heights to the lowest of lows, from great joy and contentment to exceeding doubt and betrayal and fear. That’s what a sense of call does – not only does it not always make sense, but it takes you to surprising and unexpected places, not always easy places, sometimes difficult places – physically, emotionally, spiritually. But even then, I hope and pray that difficulty never overwhelms the discernment that got you there, or the meaning you find.

I was remembering a minister friend, the late Donald Roth, who with his wife joined our church in Rochester after more than 40 years of distinguished ministry. Early in his ministry, Don was called to a congregation in southern Illinois, in the early 1960s. It was a fairly typical congregation, a place where people with different backgrounds and perspectives could come together. Don became active in local efforts to bring black and white church people together. One night, late at night, gun shots were heard. No one was hurt, but when the police investigated, it was discovered that the local KKK chapter was unhappy, very unhappy, about those efforts toward racial reconciliation. I remember clenching up as Don was telling me this story. He and Carol stayed in that community until called to another, and when he left, the black ministerial caucus blessed him on his way. What are you looking for? Come and see. Being

threatened by gun violence was certainly NOT what Don Roth was looking for, but his discernment, his vocation, his sense of call, led him to that place and that moment. It was what Jesus showed him after inviting him to come and see.

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This is the weekend where many well-intentioned white ministers become Martin Luther King, Jr. experts. I am no expert, but I have read a lot of King, and reflected, in my limited way. The more I learn and the more I experience both the more complex and the more profound King's ministry and witness become to me. And the more timely.

King spoke occasionally of his sense of call, in speeches and sermons and interviews. In some ways, being a minister's kid, it felt inevitable, except that that's not always the case. What he really wanted to do was to be an academic, write books and teach in a seminary after receiving his Ph.D. But the convergence of the moment and the need and his gifts would not allow it. Jesus said "come and see" and King found a history-making and history-shaking opportunity. His RSVP led him to a Nobel Prize, to marches, to great pulpits, to Memphis. In April 1963, it led him to Birmingham, to protest racism, and then it led him to jail.

He wrote his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" in response to "A Call for Unity," a statement by eight white Alabama religious leaders, including a Presbyterian minister, criticizing King and his methods. Track it down and read the whole letter. But let me share an extended portion now...

King wrote: "I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership...I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it..."

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows.

In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: 'Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.' And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have

blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and through fear of being nonconformists.”

Each of us is asked the question “what are you looking for?” The church is asked as well. And when we look, whether 1963 or 2020, when we “come and see,” we see racism. Our calling as individuals, given spiritual gifts to make a difference, is to combat racism. So is our calling as a church, as this particular congregation, predominantly white, with considerable resources, with the capacity but more so the spiritual gifts, to follow. How will we follow? How will we use our gifts? It may not be what we think we’re looking for, but it is what Jesus shows us when we follow him, becoming a profound opportunity and a clear and compelling call.

In one of his last sermons, preached at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, King spoke of his own sense of call: “Yes, Jesus, I want to be on your right side or your left side, not for any selfish reason. I want to be on your right side or your best side, not in terms of some political kingdom or ambition, but I just want to be there in love and in justice and in truth and in commitment to others, so that we can make of this old world a new world.”

Love, justice, truth: those are our spiritual gifts. A commitment to others: that is our spiritual gift. “What are you looking for?” Jesus asks. He says “come and see,” and the journey begins, as we live into our sense of call, to make this old world a new world. Amen.