

Ministry: Commitment of the Call
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A story – from an ancient culture. There once was a young boy who lived with an elder priest in the temple. The elder priest was going blind and the boy was very useful to him and had gained the priest's and other's trust. One night, the old priest went to bed and the boy went to sleep on the floor of them temple. As the boy was dozing off, he heard someone call his name – so he jumped up, rushed into the priest's room and said, "Here I am, you called." Well, this woke up the priest, who had not called, and said, "I didn't call you. Go back to bed." So the boy went back to his pallet and as he started to dream again, he heard his name called again, "Samuel." Again he got up and went into the priest's room and said, "here I am – you called." To which the priest again said, "No, I didn't. Go back to bed." And again, the boy returned to his bed, only to have his head hit the pillow when he heard his name again – "Samuel!" And once again he rushed into the priest's room and said, "Here I am, you called." Though it took the priest three time, he finally figured out that the boy was indeed hearing a voice, a real voice that would not be denied. So he instructed the boy to go back to bed and if he heard his named called again, say to the voice, "Speak, for your servant is listening." The boy did just that and when he heard the voice, for again, it did call, he answered, "Speak, for your servant is listing." The story goes on to say that this boy Samuel became a great prophet for his people.¹

It is not every day that we hear a call so distinctly and I do believe that we all have a calling. I mean a calling in the theological sense. That word "call" is sometimes interchanged with "vocation" – when I say theologically, I don't necessarily mean being called by a god – like Samuel was. But I mean we all have a calling, some thing to which

¹ 1 Samuel, chapter 3:1-10, Hebrew Scriptures

we are supremely suited for – having almost innate, natural skills – something we do well almost without trying perhaps. A calling to a particular work that when you're doing it, doesn't feel like work – or do so only a little of the time. I offer to you that the voice we may hear calling to us – is not the voice of some being beyond our understanding, but rather, it is the voice that resides deep within the quiet places of our heart – our soul, that when we are still, it is that voice we hear...a voice that is persistent and will not be denied. Perhaps you know of that which I speak?

Sometimes it can be a challenge to hear that voice – or rather, to listen to that voice. As the poet Nancy Shaffer, from an earlier reading, wrote, "Where were you when you heard that ancient voice?" The busyness of our lives can stifle that voice, our constant fear about heeding it can dampen the voice into a mere whisper. Our out-right stubbornness can all but silence it...or it can try. I felt called to professional ministry since early childhood but found it easier, for many reasons, to ignore it. While I worked at many jobs through college, I became a high school English teacher and enjoyed it a great deal. It was very satisfying work – so much so that the voice calling me into professional ministry was a slight whisper for a while – that is until I found myself attending a Unitarian Universalist church. The longer I attended, the more involved I became until one day I heard myself saying to someone that my job was getting in the way of my volunteering at church. And that voice that I thought was silent, roared loudly from within. So instead of listening to that voice, I moved to California. And once again found myself in work that was very satisfying but it did not nourish my soul and once again I found my involvement in the church was more challenging, rewarding, fulfilling and joyful. Sometimes that call, that voice can come across as nagging and persistent.

"Where were you when you heard that calling voice, and how, in that moment did you mark it? How, ever after, are you changed?" I remember clearly. I had been talking with my ministers the Revs. Bill and Barbara Hamilton-Holway, who you will meet at my installation. They encouraged me, mentored me and probably got fed up with me and my hesitation. One Saturday morning while sitting together at the District Assembly awards breakfast – I told them maybe, just maybe I might enter community ministry, when one of my ministers nodded and said I would do well there – and then she looked directly into my eyes and said, "and you can say 'yes' to parish ministry." She held my gaze for a long moment – and I said, 'yes, I could.' Immediately, I felt something inside click into place – like I could take a deeper breath – and I was scared down to my toes. Life from that day since has never been the same.

And I wonder...what about you? Have you heard that voice, maybe still and small or loud and persistent? How have you answered that ancient voice? Do you remember that moment when you felt yourself, your whole body said 'yes'? Answering that voice – to say, "Speak, for your servant is listening" is a courageous act. It requires faith when the way to move beyond the 'yes' is unseen. Saying 'yes' means you are trusting in yourself and something that is bigger than you are – the spirit of life. Answering the call can feel like the pulse of the universe and your energies, talents, skills are aligned in a way that nourishes your soul while you do your work in the world. Please, don't misunderstand me; I am not suggesting that some transcendent being has a plan just for you and that it is mapped out somewhere. Perhaps the call you have heard and answered isn't about your work at all. Maybe you said "yes" to intentionally being a terrific parent, maybe your call is where you volunteer or it is your art or something else altogether.

What I am offering to you is that when your talents and skills and passion are aligned with work that is beneficial to you and to others – that is a calling – a found vocation that brings peace and fulfillment – frustration too but in the bigger picture – brings joy and energy. That is an experience of saying 'yes' to that calling voice from within – that is ancient and knowing.

There is another aspect of call – and that is the call a congregation makes to a minister. It is a call into relationship and it is a most sacred and precious gift – to both entities. Just as a congregation in our faith tradition is the only body which can ordain someone into professional ministry, a congregation is the only organization that can offer a call to a person to be their minister. And there is the literal call. It was around this time last year that I literally received five calls...in one week. On a Friday, we got the call that our house in Washington state had closed. On Monday, we got the call that our house in California had closed and we were the owners. On Tuesday the architect called and agreed to work with us. On Wednesday the doctor's office called and confirmed that my partner was pregnant and on Thursday I got the call from Arvid. On Friday we decided not to answer the phone. Arvid's phone call, on behalf of the search committee, returned me into the process of being a candidate for the position of associate minister. Earlier in the year, the search committee and I had exchanged phone calls and information in writing; and then we had face-to-face interviews. Then candidating week began with a Sunday of preaching and meeting you and then a week of meetings and discussions and one more Sunday of worship, you offered a call to me to become your associate minister. The minutes of that congregation meeting reflect that from the quorum present, the vote to call me was an overwhelming majority. You offered the call – and I said yes. After a

time of sorrow and joys and discernment, that congregational meeting was a high point – for both the church and for me.

I said yes because this church is a healthy and growing church – not just growing in numbers, but growing in spirit. You are committed to good relations within this community; I said yes because you have a dynamic social justice ministry that is open to new ways of being and of doing social justice in San Diego. You are interested in honoring tradition and open to the new. There is within you a longing for grounding yourselves, the work you do in the spirit of our faith. You recognize that you are a people of faith – a prophetic church with a liberating ministry. I said yes because you are a congregation that respects the individual and trusts the larger community more. You offer one another care and support through small groups and tend to practical needs. You are all of this...and so much more.

So here we are – called together. On Oct. 28th we will go through the ritual of installation. It sounds so technical – as if we're installing an appliance or something. But it's really a ritual that recognizes our relationship – that of called minister and congregation. In that ritual, we, you and I, will covenant together to a shared ministry. To covenant with someone is to make a sacred promise – it means that we are in relationship with each other in this ministry. And I do see it as shared – for we are more together than as separate parts. In this covenant together we will promise some things to each other. Before we make those promises in two weeks, here are some ideals and ways of being that I am committed to in our shared ministry and what I invite you, I call you into as well.

Spiritual growth – both personally and communally. I have my own spiritual practice and accountability structure – meaning I have a practice that sustains me in the work I do here. It helps me to hear that small voice within and stay true to that which called me into professional ministry in the first place. And I have individuals and groups to which I am accountable for my ministry: a mentor I meet with regularly, other colleagues, a committee on ministry; and the elected board of this church – which represents all of you. I invite you, call you as individuals to have a spiritual practice that nourish your being, be it sitting meditation with our Buddhist sanghas, prayer with our UU Christians, intentional breathing, walking in nature with our EarthCentered group; I trust that as a group there is a structure of accountability that gently reminds and encourages you – and all of us, to be and act from our better selves. Collectively we are starting this work on Oct. 27th with the Good Relations workshop.

I am committed to our work together that is infused with joy and a sense of fun. Committed to our work that is infused with enthusiasm – which literally means the breath of the Divine – enthos, the breath of God. I call you into a way of being in our work that acknowledges and makes room for enthusiasm.

I am committed to being a companion with you on this journey – living deeply and for as long as we are benefiting and growing in this relationship. Not long ago, a woman said she needed to ask me something directly. Was I just using this associate minister position here at First church as a stepping stone to getting my own church in the near future? I have heard this question before in my short time with you. I told her (and you) no, that this is my church too, along with Arvid – that I want a team ministry with him and with you. My hope and desire is that together we grow deep roots and a long

lasting relationship. Being a called Associate allows for that to happen in a way that being a hired assistant does not. And I call you into this trusted and sacred relationship we share, I am committed to you and I invite you to commit to this ministry.

The poet calls to us – "Where were you when you heard that ancient voice and did Yes get born right then and did you weep? ...Teach us how to listen, how to hear. Teach us all you can of saying Yes." I invite you to say "yes" to your own inner voice that seeks harmony and balance, peace and the fulfillment of your passions meeting the world's need. And I call you to say "yes" to this, our shared ministry. What a courageous choice we make together, and with this yes, let our future begin. I pray it so – amen.