

April 27, 2016 "Lord I'm Not Perfect"

Acts 9:1-20

Start with explanation of chapter 8 with Saul persecuting the church, believers scattered after the stoning of Stephen, except for the apostles, and Saul went house to house, dragging off men and women to prison).

When was the last time the Lord got your attention? I mean, really shook you up and said to you, "Listen up"? Truth be told, it might not have been an altogether positive experience.

When things are going well, we tend not to give as much thought to the ways of God. But when calamity strikes - the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, conflict in a relationship - we think more about God and how spiritual realities can come into play in what we are going through. It's a quite natural response. A painful response, but quite natural.

But what about those times when God initiates the conversation? It's a normal day. You're thinking about what you're going to have for lunch, or you're working on a project, or painting a room. And suddenly, out of the blue, there is that inner voice that doesn't come from you. You know it instantly, and you know it instinctively. The voice has its source Elsewhere.

It may take you awhile to figure out who that Elsewhere is, but finally the only explanation you can give to it is God. You finally come to the conclusion that God is speaking to you and wants your attention. Have you ever had an experience like that? Have you?

If so, let me tell you how you can tell that your life is about to change. God will call your name twice.

That's what he did to Saul of Tarsus. It happened on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus, and is told in a story that is quite familiar to us... or should be. After Saul has been knocked to the ground by a blazing light, the Risen Christ says to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (9:4).

I suppose it's kind of like a parent who's upset with her child. Instead of two names, you get the whole name.....(ask someone in pew for their first and middle name).....or you get "everyone's" name...in my case Bill, Bob, Joan, Kathryn....you know you had better pay attention!

Well, as you may have noticed, the Bible isn't big on full names. So, when people are addressed directly by God, their name is called twice. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

It puts Saul in pretty good company...

When Abraham is about to take the life of his son Isaac for a sacrifice, God calls to him, "Abraham, Abraham!" And Abraham answers, "Here I am" (Genesis 22:11).

When Abraham's grandson Jacob comes to Beer-sheba, God calls out to him, "Jacob, Jacob!" And Jacob answers, "Here I am" (Genesis 46:2).

When a certain fugitive herdsman comes upon the strange sight of a burning bush that is not being consumed, he hears a Voice call out from the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses answers, "Here I am" (Exodus 3:4).

When the Lord calls your name twice, you can be assured that he has a job for you to do. And, I have a feeling that if that ever happens to you, you will do what just about everybody else in the Bible does. You'll put it into reverse gear and start to back up. You will say, "Thanks, Lord, but no thanks." There's just something in us that makes us not want to do what God requires... this innate reluctance to give witness of our faith. Maybe that's because it seems to us that God asks too much.

I wonder if that's not something of the way it is when God calls our name. When God lays out the requirements of our faith, we don't think we can do it. So immediately, we start backpedaling, making excuses.

It's a natural response for us to want to argue with God. Even that has biblical precedence. Both Abraham and Moses did everything they could to keep from doing what God wanted, and for good reason. They were hardly the cream of the crop. Abraham was old and Moses was a wanted criminal, with a speech impediment, no less. Not to mention that sometimes - oh, okay, pretty much all the time - God's demands seem downright unreasonable.

Take a quick look at Abraham's resume. He's seventy-five years old when God tells him to leave his homeland with nothing but his wife, his nephew, and a tent. He's pushing a hundred, and Sarah's not far behind, when God tells him he's going to be a daddy for the first time. Then, when he does finally have a son, God tells him to go out and sacrifice him to prove his devotion to his God. I think I'd argue with God about that one too, wouldn't you?

When it comes to Moses, what are the odds that a shepherd - a shepherd with a price on his head and an inability to speak plainly - could stand up to the Egyptian pharaoh and win the confrontation?

You see? God, at least as God is portrayed in scripture, seems to ask some pretty strange things of his children. And he uses the unlikeliest people to get the job done. So it would be a surprise for them not to be reluctant about his demands. But when he literally knocks you to the ground and takes away your ability to see, you don't have too many choices in the matter, do you?

That's what happened to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus Road. It is, without doubt, the most dramatic conversion ever heard; a story so compelling that Luke tells it again twice before he finishes the Book of Acts. The greatest enemy of the church becomes its greatest advocate in just a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

Look at the story. Saul is helped by his traveling companions into the city. For three days he doesn't eat or drink anything. A natural reaction for someone who has been struck blind by God, don't you think? He is visited by Ananias, who lays his hands on Saul and tells him what has happened, why it has happened, and who did it... just in case he hasn't figured it out already. Saul's sight is restored, he gets up, is baptized, has something to eat, visits the local synagogue, and commences to preach. Just like that. No reluctance there!

Not so with Ananias, the other major character in our story. He doesn't get his name called twice, but he is an important figure in what occurs. Why would God give him the unenviable task of ministering to Saul, the noted enemy of the church? Perhaps it is because God knows he doesn't have to call his name twice. Ananias has a listening ear when it comes to the ways of God. Of course, he is reluctant to approach Saul. Who wouldn't be? Saul's vengeful reputation precedes him. But Ananias does what God tells him to do, even when his name is called only once.

Once, twice, three times. When was it that God last called your name? And why are we so reluctant to respond when our name is called? After all, it is a hungry world out there, starving to hear what we have to say, searching for what he have to offer. Yet, it is a suspicious world that has "been fed both poison and junk in the name of God." A suspicious world is a violent world, as we know only too well every time we turn on the news or read the newspaper.

And for that reason, when God calls, people respond in different ways. Some say, even with a reluctance in their voice, "Here I am, Lord, use me." Others put pillows over their heads.

Well, what does God want from us? God had a specific calling in mind for Saul.

Why should we think any differently or any less when it comes to God's call to us?

Here's the question for you and me... What does God want from us? God had a specific calling in mind for Saul. Does he have the same for you?

At my home church several weeks ago tables were set up in Fellowship Hall with all the supplies for the blessing bags which the confirmation class, along with a troop of girl scouts, filled to share with those who are less fortunate.

And if you've spent any amount of time in a Presbyterian church, you have probably seen dozens of sign-up sheets over the years. Gifts for the less fortunate at Christmas, food for food pantry, Men's and Women's retreats, and more lunches and dinners than I can count. My brother refers to Presbyterians as "the casserole church".

Perhaps you became an elder and part of session, or a deacon. You joined the vocal choir, or the bell choir. Or maybe your calling was more quiet. You made a pot of coffee. You shoveled the church sidewalk before anyone got here on Sunday. You handed a tissue to someone when they started crying during a song...

And there was a reason God asks you to do certain things. It's not necessarily because it's your biggest skill. And it's not because you're perfect. It's because you're available.... . Yep. God's not looking for perfection, He's looking for available! Having an open heart, and listening when God calls your name, once, twice, or maybe three or more times!

When I was a child I had to do chores. I had to wash or dry dishes, clean my room, maybe vacuum or help with cleaning the bathroom. Now ladies, today you know sometimes you ask your husbands to do something around the house. And maybe husbands you are the one asking your wives! And you don't ask because they do it perfectly. You ask because they are available. And because it needs to get done.

And your parents didn't ask you to do things because you did them perfectly. You were available. Those things needed doing. And they taught you character. And work ethic. And the joy of a job well done. How joyful God is when your ears are opened, and you respond. We don't know what God will be calling us to do today, tomorrow, next month or next year. And we probably won't be perfect at it. Make yourself available. Listen for your name to be called. And respond in Joy. Amen.