

# Service of the Living Tradition

*Sermon by Richard S. Gilbert*

## **Called! By Whom? To What?**

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*Minister, First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY*

Called! By whom? To what? What is the nature of the "call" to ministry? Who is called? How does one know? I do know that I was literally called to preach this sermon - not by God - but close. John Buehrens made a telephone pastoral call the day after I had back surgery a year and a half ago and invited me to preach at this Service of the Living Tradition on the 40th anniversary of the UUA, which happens also to be the 40th anniversary of my ordination and the 40th anniversary of my marriage. 1961 was a most propitious year. So what else could I do but accept the call?

My theme is vocation - the vocation of ministry. We speak of job and career and profession, but we do not often speak of "vocation," a calling to live a particular kind of life. The word "vocation" itself comes from the Latin - meaning "call." Vocation is not choosing a career; it is being open to the invitation life extends to each and every one of us to become fully and responsibly human.

My thesis is that all of us are called. My question is - have you heard your call? My text is a parody of Jesus' words: "Many are called, but few are chosen." Poet Lee Pieper writes:

"Many are called but most are frozen  
in corporate or collective cold,  
these are the stalled  
who choose not to be chosen  
except to be bought and sold."

The sense of call in our time is countercultural - it cuts across the grain of our society; the prevailing ethos of our time is that we can live "an uncalled life," not living for any purpose beyond one's self." Do you remember the most popular line in President Bush's Inaugural Address - cutting taxes? Whatever happened to "ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"? Unabashed self-interest is the zeitgeist - the spirit - of our time.

I was called to ministry at 14 at the 1951 National Boy Scout Jamboree in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. Ironically, I now do battle with that same group over its homophobia. Nevertheless, I often wonder how my life would have been different had I not attended. That Sunday morning I heard a sermon by a Methodist bishop from Indiana which I interpreted as a call. Then and there I decided to be a minister - a choice I have never - well, almost never - regretted.

It was a "still, small, voice within." Its source I do not know. Some would say it was the voice of

God - which is what I thought at the time. My seminary bible professor used to say that the Hebrew prophets thought God had "whispered in their pearly ears." Therefore, they could punctuate their pronouncements with authority - "thus saith the Lord," or in more modern parlance - "God made me do it." I dare not be quite so presumptuous.

Nevertheless, I've been exploring the nature of call ever since. I am fascinated with the theory that human beings evolved into what we now know as consciousness in the centuries after these Hebrew prophets lived. In those ancient days people had no concept of "I" - of the individual having independent thoughts - it was God or the Muse speaking through them. There was little differentiation between what was perceived as the divine voice and human thought. Only gradually did humanity develop consciousness of the "I." We may have lost transcendent authority, but we have gained human responsibility.

There are times when I long for the purity - the power - the persuasive force - of that call I heard at 14. There are times I desperately long to feel that I am speaking holy writ, that I am a mouthpiece of the Almighty. But that naïve faith has given way to adult skepticism, and I move to a more psychological explanation - we might call it a deconstruction of the experience : an impressionable young boy - immersed in the life of his small town Universalist church - catapulted to a much more cosmopolitan setting - vulnerable to powerful preaching.

The painter Pablo Picasso once said he wished he could still paint as he had as a child - and tried to recapture that innocence and creativity. I would love to have the adolescent surety that my pulpit pronouncements, my every word, had divine authority.

But, happily for my congregation - I know better - and so do they - and so do you. Yet that call - whatever it was - divine or psychological or spiritual - that call has become internalized in me - now for 50 years. I heard and heeded the call at 14 and that has made all the difference.

There was another time in my life when I experienced a dramatic call to ministry. It was 1965, the year of Selma. The Rev. James Reeb had responded to Martin Luther King's call and had gone to work in a voter registration drive there, only to be brutally murdered. The UUA Board of Trustees adjourned its session to Selma and President Dana McLean Greeley urged Unitarian Universalists to converge on that bastion of racism.

At the time I was doing graduate work in social ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School, having tested my social gospel here at the First Unitarian Church of Cleveland - my first ministry - and found it wanting. I knew I had to go to Selma. We flew to Atlanta where we were met by Gene Pickett who led our car caravan over those treacherous miles to Selma.

As we walked toward Brown's Chapel I felt I was part of a liberating army - though the Alabama State Police who formed a gauntlet had a monopoly on the means of violence. Our welcome was tumultuous, and the service honoring James Reeb was one of those transforming moments in my life.

The sanctuary was so crowded I had to stand in back of the pulpit. There was a stir behind me and Martin Luther King brushed by me as he moved to the pulpit. It was our only encounter. His

eulogy touched me like nothing else ever has, and the spiritual chemistry of the Jewish prayer for the dead rising above that diverse congregation singing "We Shall Overcome" was overpowering. That scene is etched in my memory - vivid even today.

When I returned to Chicago the next day, I tried to resume work on my paper titled "The Transformative Role of the Contemporary Church in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr" - a riveting title. My professor would read it - no one else - he would grade it and return it. I was suffering from pulpit deprivation - I had a story to tell and no one to whom to tell it. There is no worse feeling for a preacher. When my wife Joyce came home from teaching that night, I confessed to her I had to go back to the parish ministry. My call had been renewed. Was God its source? Or Martin Luther King? Or was it simply that still, small voice within?

The call to ministry does not have to be quite so dramatic. We are constantly called to ministry in a thousand subtle ways; we are called to life day by dreary or delightful day. I have the sense, though, that our lives are so busy and our world is so noisy we may not hear it - and even if we did, we might not heed it.

There is plenty of precedent for not heeding the call, for choosing "not to be chosen." To believe oneself called is both exhilarating and frightening. Take the Book of Jonah - a rich allegory for our time. The late Abraham Maslow developed a theory from that book about running from responsibility - running from greatness - running from the call - which he termed the "Jonah Complex."

You know the story: Nineveh - in ancient Assyria - was a sinful city. The Lord enjoined Jonah - a successful but timid merchant - to go there and prophesy in the Lord's name - call the people to account - urge them to righteousness. Jonah was doing just fine, thank you, and resisted this divine imperative. He even boarded a ship to escape the call, but the ship sank, casting him into the belly of the whale, from which he was eventually thrown up on the shores of Nineveh. Only the powerful persuasion of Yahweh finally convinced him to preach righteousness to the wicked inhabitants, who at last repented.

Maslow's point was that people tend to resist the call to their own life vocation - resist doing what they might do when they are at their best. For the comfortable, the call can be quite disturbing. It is tempting to resist it.

Even in our own tradition there are pivotal figures who did not want to heed the call. In the early 19th century William Ellery Channing was happily ensconced as minister of the prosperous Arlington Street Church in Boston, a congregation with many cotton merchants who benefited from slavery. He was "apostle to the Brahmins." Channing, while morally opposed to that evil, had not spoken out forcefully. Besides, the abolitionists were a rather abrasive lot - not the kind of people a Boston patrician could or should embrace.

From the heart of Upstate New York - that cauldron of social reform - came The Rev. Samuel J. May of the Unitarian Church in Syracuse, who inveighed upon him to take a strong stand against slavery, even if he had to risk his ministry to do so. Channing, the "reluctant radical," heard that call - and attacked slavery with a vengeance, incurring the wrath of many in his congregation.

Whence came that call? From God or from Samuel F. May or from the deeper regions of his own conscience?

I have concluded how we name the source of our call should not be our primary concern. I am not worried about its theological geography, but its power and authenticity. Whether we believe the call comes from God or from the heart or if they are part and parcel of the same motion - I am convinced each of us is called. We have but to open our ears and hearts to hear and heed.

Our culture doesn't really want us to hear or heed the call to anything beyond ourselves. The God of the marketplace would be pleased to keep this call in a subordinate position. The siren calls of profit and power and status are enticing; the call to climb the ladder of success is seductive; the call to triumph in the fierce competition of life is so loud, it is rarely that we can hear any other voice.

We Unitarian Universalists are not very good at listening; we are awfully busy talking. We, who have been called the "technicians and bureaucrats of the establishment," are very busy and we are very important. The voice within is still and small and hard to hear. I believe we suffer from the Jonah Complex - we are tempted to triviality - to deny our call to greatness - even in this 40th anniversary of our merged movement.

I remember being surprised during a tour of denominational headquarters in Boston some years ago when the director of computer services noted how many on-line Unitarian Universalists listed Unitarian Universalism as their hobby. Our faith must be more than a hobby. There can be no casual commitment if we are to survive and thrive as spiritual beings, and if our movement is to flourish as a significant force in the culture.

You may recall W. B. Yeats' poem "The Second Coming" with its prophetic lines, "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Without presuming we are the best, I agree with educator Harold Taylor who wrote of our movement, "There is no hot white flame burning, there is only a smoldering of branches with an occasional spurt of fire.... In a movement where everything is allowed, too little is asserted with passion."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor martyred by the Nazis in 1945, had a different sense of call - the call to life as a vocation. The work to which one feels called must be set within the larger context of responsibility. He wrote, "If, for example, I am a physician, then in the concrete instance I serve not only my patients, but also medical science and, with it, science and the knowledge of truth in general. . . . It may happen that I, as a physician, am obliged to recognize and fulfill my concrete responsibility no longer by the sick-bed but, for example, in taking public action against some measure which constitutes a threat to medical science or human life or truth."

Vocation is responsibility, and responsibility involves a total response of the whole person to the whole of reality. While I was attending chapel at Harvard Divinity School during a 1986 Sabbatical, I heard a story about a man who at 30 decided to write his memoirs and spent the next 15 years in the process. At 45 he determined he had left a great deal out, and so spent the next 30 years refining the project. At 75 he found himself immobilized by the mountains of

paper in his house. He concluded that nothing had happened since he began his memoirs. He was right. His whole life was on "call waiting." He had neither heard nor heeded the call to any purpose beyond the self.

There is within each of us that still, small voice that calls us to be better than we are, to do more than we now do, to aspire to become what we uniquely can be. Ministry is a particular calling, of course. It has been my privilege to explore that calling for four decades. But, in a larger sense, we are all engaged in a mutual ministry. As my colleague Gordon McKeeman so wisely put it - "Ministry is what we all do - together."

To what are we called? Surely we are called to do more than merely to survive in a dog-eat-dog world. Surely we are called to do more than indulge our pleasures. Surely we are called to do more than make our way in the world in some false sense of self-sufficiency. Surely we are called to be more than consumers of abundance, more than manipulators of material. Surely we can be more than self-indulgent practitioners of a faith that is all about ME!

We are called, but to what? Individually and collectively we are called: and our most vital vocation is simply being there in love and justice - being there at the point of need - whether it be at the bedside of a dying parishioner, joining hands with her family singing "Amazing Grace", or trudging through sheets of rain around Jacobs Field to witness against the racism of the Chief Wahoo mascot.

The call can be uncomfortable. It would be hard to imagine Jesus saying, "Take up your cross and follow me - it'll make you feel good." We are called upon to be - to be for others - to be is to be for others.

In a sense all my life I have been called - called into being by loving parents - called to ministry at Valley Forge - called to graduate study during my first ministry here in Cleveland - called back from academia to parish ministry by my experience with Martin Luther King in Selma - called from time to time by my wife and sons to shape up - called to account by my parishioners in three congregations - called to action by that saving remnant of souls who cannot give up the conviction that they can repair - if they cannot quite save - the world.

We are called by our conscience, called by our history, called by our own religious community, called by God if you prefer - to be there in love and justice. We are called to come out of a culture of contentment which would cocoon us, isolates us from an unjust world in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer - in which we arrogantly despoil the planet - which makes us mere shoppers in an exploitative global supermarket - which makes us constant consumers of a bland and boring cultural diet - and which convinces us to express the lowest common denominator spiritually and ethically.

We who are caught in the "predicament of the prosperous" are called to a "theology of relinquishment," not a condescending charity but an ethic of justice to work unceasingly for a just society which will not accept the market as God - which yearns for a Beloved Community in which none shall want, equity will replace superfluity, and generosity will transform self-indulgence.

Religious scholar Huston Smith tells of a Labor Day block party when a newcomer asked him if they could have lunch together. "When that happened," writes Smith, "he catalogued a string of way stations that he had moved through - psychedelics, India, Rajneesh, Da Free John... - and then came to the point. 'My problem,' he said, 'is that I am convictionally impaired. I can believe something for a year or two, and then it dissolves and I start searching again.'"

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in corporate or collective cold.

These are the stalled who choose not to be chosen  
except to be bought and sold."

Each one of us is called to conviction - IF - if we listen to the still, small voice within - a troubling voice - a disturbing voice - a compelling voice - an imperative voice. We are all called to this ministry of love and justice.

The German poet Heinrich Heine stood with a friend before the cathedral of Amiens in France.

"Tell me, Heinrich," said his friend, "why can't people build piles like this any more?"

Replied Heine: "My dear friend, in those days people had convictions. We moderns have opinions. And it takes more than opinions to build a Gothic cathedral."

And it take more than opinions to build a religious faith that inspires; it takes more than opinions to sustain a movement that would repair the world; it takes more than opinions to build the Beloved Community of Love and Justice. If we aspire to be more than mere occupants of time and space; if we wish to be more than mere historical footnotes, if we wish to be creators - not just recipients - of history, we had best open our ears and our hearts to hear and to heed the call.

As Mary Oliver writes:

"Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

With your one wild and precious life?"

And that is the fundamental question - to which I respond:

Listen! Hear! Heed!

In those rare moments when we hear the voice -

The source of which we do not know,

But the reality of which is beyond doubt,

May we heed its tender ministrations

And be convinced by its strength.

Listen! Hear! Heed! Listen! Hear! Heed!