

CALLED, CLAIMED, NAMED
(Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 13:15-17,21-22)

What did you do when God called you? Did you pull your pillow over your head? Did you turn the radio up to drown it out? Did you pretend not to hear? Or did you say, "Here I am, Lord, tell me what to do"?

Of course, maybe you're saying, "Well, I never heard God calling me. I couldn't even imagine what a call from God might sound like. How would I know it was God?"

I'm going to suggest, as gently as I know how, that if you've never heard God calling, it's because you haven't been listening.

The Constitution of the United Church of Christ says that "God calls the whole church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society." So there you go. "God calls the whole church and every member." That settles it; there's obviously no higher authority than the Constitution of the UCC. Actually, all that provision does is restate one of the great insights of the Protestant Reformation: the principle of the priesthood of all believers. According to Martin Luther, every Christian is a priest, and baptism is our ordination. John Calvin and the other Reformers agreed with him. And so do we.

Of course, there are ordained ministers in the UCC and other Protestant churches. But all ordination in that everyday sense means is that someone has been set aside for a special ministry. There's nothing magical about it. It doesn't give us any special powers.

In some ways, getting ordained is choosing the easy way out. Remember, God calls us all. Hearing that as a call to ordained ministry lets folks like me choose a prescribed, defined role. The church becomes our full-time vocation.

The rest of you don't enjoy that luxury. You have the harder job of straddling two worlds. You have a kind of dual citizenship. When you come together as the church, you're in God's country, a country governed by love. But when you leave this place and go out into the "real world," you cross a border into a country governed by an entirely different set of laws. It's hard to be a Christian "out there." It's no country for tender hearts.

As one fellow put it, "On Sunday morning, I walk into a world that is the way God meant it to be. People are considerate of one another. Strangers are welcomed. We pray for justice and peace. Our sins are forgiven. We all face in the same direction, and we worship the same God. When it's over, I feel so full of love it's unbelievable. But in twenty minutes as I'm driving home it's already started to wear off. By Monday morning it's all gone, and I've got another whole week to wait until it rolls around again."

Can any of you relate to that? Do any of you ever feel the tension of trying to live as a real Christian in a world that doesn't give a hoot about love and peace and justice and compassion and mercy? As Christians we're supposed to love everybody. But a lot of people in this world frankly aren't very loveable – unlike

the church; where everyone is loveable. A lot of people in the world aren't so loveable, so we've got our work cut out for us, and it's not easy. I wonder if clergy, including myself, don't sometimes make it sound easy, so we wind up making people feel guilty when they don't quite live up to our loftiest ideals.

Somewhere along the way we lost the Reformers' vision of the church as a priestly people – everyone set apart for ministry by baptism. That's one reason I prefer the title "pastor" to "minister." We're all ministers. A pastor is someone who makes a living in ministry, and lay people don't. That's the real difference.

The idea that every baptized Christian is a minister doesn't appeal to everyone. It sounds like even more work, and most of you already have all the work you can do. It sounds like more responsibility, and most of you are already staggering under loads that are way too heavy. Barbara Brown Taylor tells of one woman who listened to her talk about the ministry of the laity as God's best hope for the world and then said at the end of the talk, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to be that important."

She heard the invitation to ministry as a call to do more – to serve on another committee or teach Sunday school or cook meals for shut-ins – or as a call to be more – to be more generous, more loving, more religious. No one had ever introduced her to the idea that her ministry might simply involve being who she already was and doing what she already did – with one difference: that she understand herself as God's person in and for the world.

Let's be clear. That's not easy. And it's not necessarily even safe. Answering God's call can be a frightening thing to do. There are too many examples of what can happen to God's people.

I'm sure you all know who Rosa Parks was. She was that African American woman who did something she wasn't supposed to do. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks sat down in the front of a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in one of the seats reserved for white passengers. That was a daring, provocative, dangerous thing to do in Alabama in 1955.

Rosa Parks was the secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP. She had studied the theory and tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience at the Highlander Folk School, where Martin Luther King, Jr., was also a student. But when she sat down at the front of the bus that day, she didn't have any guarantee that nonviolence was anything more than a nice theory or that her community would back her up.

Rosa Parks sat down because she had reached the point where she just couldn't go on any longer living one way and feeling another. She decided, "I will no longer act on the outside in a way that contradicts the truth that I hold deeply on the inside. I will no longer act as if I were less than the whole person I know myself inwardly to be."

Rosa Parks is one of the heroes of the civil rights movement in this country. No doubt about that. But she wasn't superwoman. We like to imagine our heroes as special, extraordinary people – because it's safer for us that way. Rosa Parks might have been superwoman, but we're not. We're just ordinary folks who could never come close to doing what she did. We put our heroes on pedestals to protect ourselves, to excuse ourselves.

I don't know if it's true or not, but the popular legend is that years later a graduate student interviewed Rosa Parks and asked her why she sat down at the front of the bus. She didn't say she did it to launch a revolution. She said, "I sat down because I was tired."

I don't know if that's true or not, but I hope it is because it reminds us that a hero doesn't necessarily have to be heroic. Maybe Rosa Parks was tired and her feet hurt and she just didn't feel like walking another few steps to the back of the bus. But maybe she was tired of living in fear.

Did Rosa Parks hear God calling her that day in Montgomery? Maybe she wouldn't have put it in those exact terms. But what is God's call but a call to live our lives in the most authentic way possible? What is God's call but a call to be true to our deepest beliefs and values? What is God's call but a call to live out our baptismal vows? Those vows call us

- To renounce the powers of evil and accept the freedom of new life in Christ
- To Christ's disciples and follow in his way, resisting oppression and evil, showing love and justice, and witnessing to his work and word as best we are able
- To share in the community of Christ's people and further Christ's mission in the world

If we've been baptized, that's what we have promised to do. May we never forget our baptism. And may we never fail to live as people who have been baptized: called by God, claimed by God, named by God.