

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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JUNE 20, 2010



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**Romans 8:28-34**

**"Calling"**

Today we celebrate *the calling of Craig Malbon* to pastoral ministry; a great day of celebration for Craig and for our church! In the Services of Ordination and Installation, we will affirm, ratify, bless, what we agree is already a work of God in Craig's life - that he has a calling.

But what about the rest of us? Do we have callings from God, and if so what are they, and how do we hear them? In the church of Jesus Christ, the history of "calling" went through a great change at the Reformation. In Roman Catholic thought, "calling" (or "vocation" if you prefer the Latin to the Greek word) refers to a call to the priesthood, or to a religious order. It is a "high calling" and is reserved for a few people; it is still used that way today. The Reformers, especially Luther and Calvin, took a very different approach, believing that all Christians have a calling from God, reflecting his purpose for each one of us - whether his plan was for what we used to call "secular" or "religious" activities. So the plowman and the merchant, the magistrate and the parent, each had their own calling, and each was as worthy in God's eyes, and should be in ours, as any other.

### 1) *Biblical Calling*

If we go back to the Bible, we find there are in fact several kinds of "calling" that apply to all people. The first is the universal *call of God*

*to each human being to be reconciled to him through Jesus Christ.* We are first of all called to God himself.

This is the common biblical use - Israel was called to be "the people of God," New Testament Christians are frequently referred to as "the called." In Romans 8, Paul refers to people God has "*predestined... called... justified... glorified;*" clearly every believer in Jesus Christ. To the Corinthians he writes "*God has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ.*" Of his own conversion he says "*God set me apart from birth... and called me by his grace.*" So the first question to ask about our calling is "have we heard and responded to the call to God through Jesus?" Without responding to this first calling, we shall not hear the other "callings."

Secondly, *all Christians are called to a holy life* - that is, a life dedicated to and belonging to God. This is said repeatedly in the New Testament, often in the language of "*living a life worthy of our calling.*" This is not a life designed to win God's favor, but a life that is worthy of people who by God's grace bear the name *Christian*. The shape of that living we know very well, and are all conscious of how much progress we still have to make in that direction!

Thirdly - the calling we are perhaps most interested in - there is a call of God to Christians to some specific task in life. Paul

was “called to be an apostle and set apart.” He reminds Timothy to pursue his calling as a pastor. He also talks to new believers about “the place of life that God assigned... to which God has called you.”

## 2) How God Calls

So this is the part we want to understand better. How does God call us to some particular “place in life”? In the Reformation period, Luther or Calvin were likely to emphasize that everyone had a “place” or a “station” in life – the medieval idea that God had assigned everyone a fixed place that they should be content with. In our much more fluid societies where education and mobility open many new options, we imagine that there are many “stations” we could fill in life, and we want to know how we discover the right one.

The process of a specifically “religious calling” offers some instructive clues for all of us. It often begins with an inner sense that God wants us to do something. This does not usually come because we have rationally analyzed our options, but because we have a feeling. It could have many sources, and we could subject it to psychological analysis, and might even get an interesting picture of our deep motivations. But if we are Christians, we really want to discover whether this is *God’s purpose* for our lives, whether *he* is calling us in some direction.

How do we test this? The major answer is always by the Word and the Spirit and through prayer. If this feeling is from God, we can expect it to be consistent with what we know of his general will for all believers – we can write off a feeling that we are called to be a murderer or a drug dealer – and we expect the Spirit to increasingly confirm our feeling as time goes by – this is not something we forget about in a week!

Then it is time to weigh our gifts, our talents, our desires. Could we do this? If we are 5 feet 2 inches tall, we are probably not called to a career in professional basketball! If we cannot carry a tune in a bucket, we are probably not called to opera. Has God given us at least some of what it takes to do this thing – not everything, but at least something? And does it excite our imaginations? Can we see ourselves doing this and enjoying it? Do we desire it? I’m convinced that calling comes with a sense that we would really like this to happen, even if we are not at all sure we are equipped for it, and “can’t see how to get there from here.”

Then it is time to test our sense of call with other people – those we respect for their wisdom, those we know to be Christians with discernment; friends, family, peers, people in positions of authority. Do our teachers or our counselors agree that we could do this? Do our parents, or our spouse? Do our superiors? It’s not always easy to discuss this, of course, and there are some barriers we cannot cross to get an opinion – we can’t usually ask our boss if she thinks we would be good at something totally unrelated to our present job – unless of course what we dream of exists within the company!

If the Word, the Spirit, our own hearts, and other people all support our sense of calling, it’s time to test it in practice. Maybe we need to get training, maybe it’s a matter of pushing on some doors to see if they open, maybe there is some way to try this as a part-time volunteer, maybe there are admission tests we can take. If when we get our feet a little wet, other people or our hearts say “this is it,” we may be on the right road. Of course there are some things you can’t test ahead of time, but you can read, and listen to how other people have experienced this thing. It’s a matter of preparing ourselves. If we are

Christians, this process has to be saturated throughout with prayer, and when possible, conversations with a friend or mentor.

### 3) *What Are We Called To?*

So what might God be calling us to? It could be a job, a career, a profession. Discerning what to work on used to be something we did at say 18-22, and that set a path for much of our lives. Not so anymore – jobs are hard to get and to keep, more education or training is now needed. We may feel called to one career in our 20s and another very different one in our 40s or 50s!

So maybe we love science, and we want to be in research or in medicine. Maybe we love helping people, and we want to be in nursing or social work. Maybe we love ideas and words and we want to be an academic, or seeing young minds grow and we want to teach. Maybe we love to see things made and work, and we want to be in construction or engineering. Maybe we have the gifts and the heart that says we should pursue music or art. Maybe farming strikes us as the ideal way of life, or animal care, or protecting other people, or starting our own business, or cooking.

Or maybe our calling is something else altogether. Maybe we are women who above all want to be mothers. Maybe we are potentially good fathers, and need the courage to face our tender side and become parents. Maybe at our age, we should position ourselves to be good grandparents, and have a positive influence on our grandchildren as well as helping our children through child-rearing.

Maybe we can volunteer for community service in a dozen different ways, and make a difference to the lives of hundreds or thousands of young people, needy people, altogether too busy people. Maybe we can

“give something back” to our schools, our churches, our communities, for all the good we have received from them over the years.

Maybe as our energy decreases, we can become encouragers, and people who pray a lot. Every neighborhood, every school, every church needs them. I read recently a wonderful article about a Presbyterian church that kept on producing seminarians and new young ministers from its congregation. Someone decided to try to figure out how and why: they interviewed the pastors, the staff, the leaders, and baffled, finally asked the young ministers and seminarians themselves. It turned out that every one of them had at one time been approached by an elderly lady in the congregation who said *“I think you have the gifts for ministry.”*

What a gift of encouragement! What a calling! What are you called to? Now, not when you were 25? Do you even think about it? It might be a new career, but it’s as likely to be a new activity that in your heart you have always dreamed of pursuing. Does God still speak to you? Are you speaking to him? What might any of us be called to next? We should give him pleasure in our use of the gifts and time he has given us. Perhaps we shall be privileged as a church to hold a public celebration when you set off to be a missionary, or work for the Peace Corps, or pursue some wonderful new calling on your life!

Let us pray...