

“From Call to Ministry” by Pat Conover

Sermon for Seekers Church

July 30, 2006

Pat Conover

From Call to Ministry

Transliteration: Ephesians 3: 20-21 (Starting from REB)

Thanks be to God, who works through the power among us to do immeasurably more than we can ask or think. To God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation evermore.

This is my favorite benediction in the Bible. It is a pleasure to work from it as the basis for this sermon. The notion that God works through the power that is already among us is at the heart of my theology. This is not theology as intellectual speculation. This theology aims at appreciating and articulating the significance of what we can experience when we open ourselves as individuals and build loving relationships with each other as a Christian community. Such love can guide us into some of the ministry that is available to us.

Seekers talks a great deal about call, about discerning and claiming our individual callings. We believe with our lives that taking on our callings give us a meaningful relationship to God. When we walk the path of calling the world looks

different and feels different. We may not get all the clarity we want but, when we pay attention to our inner journeys, we notice that we are sharing in the meaning of life. That is a glorious feeling. My life matters. Your life matters. The small chapter that Seekers is writing in the book of Christianity matters. With such appreciation comes thanksgiving. When we live out of such abundance that our lives and our relationships are transformed and one of the results is that we become wellsprings of ministry.

To sense the power of God at work in our relationships with each other provides a basis for faith-filled lives. Appreciating that God is alive and active in our lives, in our relationships, gives us hope that we can discern and align with what God is doing in the lives of other people, and that's the basis for ministry rather than mere service. Believing in God with your life, hoping in God, becomes the grounding for risking, for trying, and for courage when you hit the hard parts of ministry; when you hit confusion, mixed results, even rejection. When I lost my career as a sociologist, when I lost my career as a parish minister, I gained a deeper understanding of what faith can cost, what ministry can cost. I held steady, went to my next sense of calling and created a not-for-profit low-income housing program in Charlotte, NC. After a year of producing almost no income for my family, just as the projects began rolling through our process, I got a surprise call to come to Washington in 1986 and start work for the national level of justice ministry of the United Church of Christ. My path had a successful conclusion but it was sure confusing along the way. I think the more important story is that I was willing to live with yet more failures as the world counts such things.

Caring matters. However, it also matters that we see that God

is at work in others before we contact them, even before we offer our ministry in some anonymous way. It helps us keep straight that the power is from God and not our individual possession. This lets us get our egos out of the way and helps us protect against the most insidious dangers of ministry: self-aggrandizement, depending on thanks from others, blaming others, and judgementalism. It is one thing to see the judgment of God in the pain that arises from sin in yourself and others. It is quite another to wish for the judgment of God on others to prop up your own sense of self-importance, to justify your anger, to fortify your sense of spiritual superiority.

The name of this sermon is "From Call to Ministry." It comes out of my awareness that Seekers talks a lot more about Call than about Ministry. We also talk more about Outer Journey than about Ministry. I think there is a little more at stake here than just language habits.

Perhaps the most fundamental concern is that Call is commonly understood as being about me: **my** call, **my** gifts, **my** concerns, **my** discernment, **my** commitment. Ministry is about what **others** need, about caring for other people and their needs, about connecting to other people – even getting entangled, about getting outside of your comfort zone, about recognizing that other people have a right to have expectations about you, about noticing your position of privilege, about moving from charity to solidarity. As my friend Sandy is wont to say, "Pat, I love you and I'm willing to die for you but don't ask me for another weekend."

The language of "Outer Journey" can have the same feeling of me, me, me: my outer journey, my learning, my giving. Ministry

occurs when one's outer journey is grounded not only in a personal relationship to God but also in the lure of the power of God to do "immeasurably more than we can ask or think." When all we put into the outer journey is our own power, our own interests, our own awareness and caring, we are quick to wear out, even to become resentful. When we bang up against the tough realities that limit and distort ourselves, when we experience the alienation of distorting others with our preconceptions, when we contemplate the vastness of need compared to our limited resources, it hurts.

It is sobering to ask why I wear out so quickly when things do not go smoothly. When I am hungry for the recipient of ministry to say thanks, I know that I am still stuck in me, me, me. When I want to see the results in my timeframe, I know I am stuck in me, me, me. When my ministry is always within the limits of my budget and my calendar, I see how limited my desire for relationship and for solidarity has become. Outer Journey becomes Ministry when we start to follow the lures of God, begin to trust or at least hope for the power of God, when we engage our hungers for the love of God and let love lead the way into connection.

It is not so easy to claim ministry. It is easy to step back because of confusion, because we do not feel welcomed into ministry, because we feel clumsy, because it feels risky to try out what is meaningful. Sometimes an effort to offer ministry is not even noticed. Sometimes an offer of ministry earns you resentment because you have touched a wound a person wants to ignore. None of that really matters. There is a lot of difference between claiming ministry and claiming success or satisfaction.

In Seekers, we try to help each other in ministry by crying

together in the pain by celebrating together when love breaks through. We keep reminding each other that we have to give ministry away for free, even when we are being paid for it, maybe especially when we are paid for it. We try to help each other learn from our experiences. When we pay the tuition, we might as well take the lessons. We remember together that, Jesus, who gave so much, was crucified. You will find that in Seekers, when you have been hurt one way or another, there is a chance to forgive, to heal, to grow. That is how ministry muscle grows. When we lift weights, we get micro-tears in our muscles. Our bodies respond to these micro-tears by growing more muscle fibers, which prepares the body for more weight lifting. It is a key part of the way our bodies adjust to our environments. Exercising ministry is a key way that Seekers can grow into stronger ministry.

Suppose we were to start our outer journey from ministry rather than call. What might that look like?

Emil Brunner, an early 20th Century theologian and ethicist, opens one window on such a perspective. In the following quote, he was addressing the ethics of work in a capitalist society, addressing his concern about the drudgery of much factory work.

On the other hand, it is necessary to shape the social structure of the worker's world in such a way as to take away his fear of being a mere cog in an impersonal machine. A true solution can come only through the conception that work, whatever it must be, is the service of God and of the community and therefore the expression of man's (or woman's) dignity.

Quote of Emil Brunner found in the Gifford Lectures, 1948

(found in Lucifer's Hammer by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle,
1977 – Ballantine/Fawcett p. 28)

First, this quote reminds us that being able to ask the question of call is based, in part, on great economic privilege and on an open jobs market that allows people to change jobs. Such privilege is not distributed evenly in the world, in the United States, or in Seekers. Neither is access to education and training. Moreover, we all have limits due to health, abilities, backgrounds and previous choices. Still, Seekers has modeled a community where many members have reflected deeply and changed their lives to pursue their callings. We stand ready to help others in such journeys. It is a way of embracing our abundance and giving it away. We grow as a Christian community when we treat our privilege as abundance to share.

Brunner is talking about finding meaning in the middle of life even when one's life choices are highly limited, even when one is stuck in drudgery. Brunner's answer is that any work that serves community and is grounded in intentional service of the community as service of God, gives dignity to life. If you are making widgets, and the community needs widgets, and even if making widgets is boring and poorly paid, even if no one will ever know that you made their widget, it can still be meaningful service to God. It can be ministry. Brunner is pointing to meaning arising from caring, responsibility and love rather than from self-fulfillment, expressing one's highest gifts, and the excitement of overcoming the challenges of personal transformation.

Ministry can become part of a journey to solidarity, rather than an expression of charity, when it is grounded in caring,

responsibility and love that is called out by to feeling the needs of others. Even when we are stuck in the anonymity of making widgets for others, we can give our labor away as a gift. Your gift need not be an expression of your highest self to be helpful. We can be thankful that in Seekers our ministries are seldom so constrained.

Some of you, remembering that my theology is dialectic, have already guessed that I think you can work from the perspective of ministry and the perspective of call at the same time. Here is an illustration. I am very proud of my daughter who is a high school mathematics teacher living in Eastern North Carolina. She made a series of choices after college that long delayed her getting to her calling to be a math teacher. Her family responsibilities and her many moves from town-to-town kept her away from what she knew she wanted to do. I am proud of her because she did not forget her calling. I am proud of her because, through most of her twenties and thirties, she worked creatively and with great devotion to meet her obligations to her family. That included working in a number of business jobs that did not call out her highest gifts but still offered opportunity for service to the human community. The point here is not that teaching is a higher calling than business. For another person the claiming of highest calling might be a move from teaching to business. Nevertheless, whatever your calling, whatever your circumstance, you can treat your gift as a gift and you can direct your ministry to those who need the best you have to offer.

To combine the two perspectives of calling and ministry you might constantly keep in mind not only from what you are being called but also to what you are being called. If this sounds a lot to you like Erich Fromm's guidance about moving from

“freedom from” to “freedom for” then you have guessed another of my existential landmarks.

We talk a lot about discerning our callings in Seekers on the presumption that once a call is discerned that we will turn toward such a calling both individually and collectively. Such turning toward, sometimes as an act of repentance, means we move out of old patterns into new possibilities and a different mix of risks. It is a basic part of the Biblical message from Abraham to Jesus. God calls us into radical freedom and is intolerant of our excuses.

To pick up a call is not an entrance into some general territory of freedom. It is rather recognition of the **intrinsic** freedom each of us already has and an investment of our lives in meaningful ministry, in vulnerable engagement. It is not a freedom for willfulness. It is not a freedom for self-indulgence. It is not a freedom to pursue the idols of wealth, fame and happiness. It is a freedom to serve, to care, to engage, to be responsible, to live with meaning whatever the rest of the world thinks.

I think that part of the “secret” in the name “Seekers” is the recognition that we cannot get everything straightened out before we start acting. We cannot guarantee success before the first step is taken. This is part of the escape from the culture of professionalism.

Professionalism was a good and powerful breakthrough in the formation of our current culture, but it is not the same as ministry. Ministry is not justified by having great skills or

by keeping control of situations. One of the most fundamental structures of Seekers is that we have no one playing the role of professional clergy. Whatever ministry is done, will be done by us. We cannot just pay for it with contributions and then go on with the rest of our lives as if ministry has been taken care of.

Do not misunderstand me. I think training in ministry is important. One hallmark of Seekers is that a lot of us have sought out ministry training of one kind or another. A good current example is the training that several Seekers are getting in Interplay. Nevertheless, offering ministry, while it may involve building professional level skills and connections, is to move beyond professionalism to the vulnerability of caring. Jesus kept it simple. **Whoever** offers a cup of water is engaging in ministry and when it is done with love, we are opening ourselves not only to work but also to grace.

We have Seekers who are very accomplished in one area of ministry or another. The range of ministry skills within our small community is staggering. The levels of loving and caring and commitment within Seekers are inspiring, heartening. However, the growing edge of Seekers, the hope of Seekers, is that many more will come forward, explore, grow, claim and especially practice ministry. Each of us is called to ministry; we are not called to be better than someone else is at some ministry skill. This is crucial to the common life of Seekers. If we are to continue to be a ministering community, if we are to grow and transform as a ministering community, then everyone needs to pick up their part. All ministries are needed and it all makes a difference.

As a community, we need to be vigilant about welcoming people

into ministry. It is shortsighted efficiency to try to have the most skilled do all the work. It is injuring to want our ministry from the priest and the Levite and to reject the help offered by a Samaritan.

The radicalness of the parable of the Samaritan who helped a Jew is that it values caring over expectations of reciprocity. Ministry is not a synonym for good relationships. Ministry focuses on the needs of another person, even if it is just anonymously making widgets. This is at the heart of Christian economics: not free exchange but free giving.

Thanks be to God who works through the power among us to do immeasurably more than we can ask or think...

That is a lot different than making your living as a professional. That is a lot different from offering charity through personal involvement as a volunteer. We tasted a bit of that rising sense of power in [the Mark class](#) and showed a little bit of it in our collective sharing of the Word a few Sundays ago. We heard from Sandra last week that this includes moving toward suffering rather than managing suffering and getting through it.

The happy phrase from Celebration Circle that guides the [liturgy in this season](#), “*becoming prayer*,” points to the integration of inner and outer journey. It is a moving beyond me, me, me into the connectedness God offers.

With all this in mind, let us listen freshly to the Reflection Message quoted from Michael Quoist

“If we knew how to listen to God,” that is a message of inner journey as centering prayer which may include confession, thanksgiving, intercession and petition but is much more than

that.

"if we knew how to look round us," that is moving out from our center and taking the other seriously whatever our own gifts and callings are.

"Our whole life would become prayer." and ministry would be a kind of awareness and work that is accessible in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

"...it unfolds under God's eyes and no part of it must be lived without being freely offered to God." This is not so much freedom from constraint as freedom for ministry.

If we knew how to listen to God, if we know how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer. ...it unfolds under God's eyes and no part of it must be lived with being freely offered to God.