

**“The Nature of Calling”**  
**John 21:1–19**  
**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**  
**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**  
**Ordination Service for Michael Hood**  
**January 22, 2023 at 5:00 P.M.**

Numerous times over the course of over forty years of ministry, often during challenging times, I have noted the wisdom of something a mentor of mine said — that it is our sense of calling that sustains us when we are moved to question our role as ministers. Trusting that it was God who launched us on this path and is still guiding us is all we need to keep taking one step at a time until there is more light and hope. Of course, when I have named this reality, Dana has wondered, “Did you have Caller ID working that day?” I don’t think she is questioning my gifts as much as she is naming the challenges that come with this role that no one in his/her right mind would choose without a Divine nudge.

But kidding aside, calling is central to who we are and what we do. Michael, you have written about your sense of calling as part of the ordination process, partly because we required you to write such a paper, but the story is yours, and in the texts you have chosen for this service, calling is a central theme, especially in the reading from John. So, it seems appropriate to take a few moments to reflect on the nature of this thing called “calling” as we prepare to offer our blessing on your ongoing fulfillment of it. And we should note that while there is a distinctiveness to the calling of anyone who serves in a defined role of leadership in the church, God calls and gifts each of us for ministry.

The first thing to note about the fascinating conversation between Jesus and Peter recorded in John 21, after Jesus’ resurrection, is that this is not the first time Jesus has called Peter to a specific purpose and role. We read this morning the story from Matthew 4 about Jesus calling fishermen, including Peter, to follow him. Last week we read another version of the same story in John 1. As we know, Peter followed that

call, sometimes more successfully than others. He confessed Jesus as the Messiah at Caesarea Philippi, revealing insight and devotion, and then immediately rebuked Jesus for predicting his suffering and death, at which point Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan!” It was a gut punch of disappointment, like watching our team beat a rival in a heated game only to lose badly to an unranked opponent. How could this happen?

Well, again as we know, it would get worse for Peter. He continued to follow Jesus, often being the first to say out-loud what others were thinking anyway — I see you there, Michael — and doing what Jesus wanted him to do. But then, Jesus predicted that the time would come when he would deny even knowing him three times. “No way,” said Peter, almost through tears, “No way!” But, of course, he did deny him, after Jesus was arrested, and Peter feared for his own life.

So, here we are now after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and Jesus is calling Peter again, an act of grace in and of itself. “Do you love me?” Jesus asks three times. Peter is upset by this repetition. Does Jesus not know how he feels? Well... Most see this as a reflection of the three times Peter denied Jesus. There is a charcoal fire in both scenes (John 18:18; 21:9). So, there seems to be a link. This is not lost on Peter, perhaps it’s why it bothers him so much, but Jesus is calling him, again, and Peter will say yes.

The message for us is that calling is an ongoing reality which can be renewed and transformed over time. Moses spent forty years in Egypt, forty more in Midian, and yet the most significant part of his life was yet to come. Abraham and Sarah had a clear calling, the essence of which remained the same, to begin a faithful nation, but they never imagined what specific form this calling would take — having a child when they were packing for Springmoor! Who we are called to be may not change, but the details of how we live it out may and probably will over time, especially in this day when so much is changing in the world, though I should note that it seems clear, Michael, that your calling remains as Youth and College Minister here for a long time!

Calling is an ongoing reality, but not only that; we also see in this story that God’s call in our lives endures through all the ups and downs

we experience, through the times when we feel energized and on top of the world, and the times when we feel like we have utterly failed. And we should note — our evaluation of faithfulness may not always match God's. But God's calling endures through it all. God's mercy and love endure through it all. The treasure of the Gospel is always found in earthen vessels, which is good news because we are all earthen vessels.

I should also note that some call attention to the different Greek words that are used for love in this text. The first two times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, he uses the verb *agapan* and Peter says yes, using the verb *philein*, while the third time, both use *philein*. We think of *agape* as being God-like love and *philein* as brotherly love. Is Peter offering less than Jesus is asking for until Jesus finally settles for the best Peter can do?

Well, Jesus embraces the best any of us can do, but I accept Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown's conclusion that these two words for love are used interchangeably in John. Jesus is not lowering his expectations, though he is clearly extending grace simply by calling Peter again, and he will continue to extend grace to Peter and us. Thank God! But Jesus goes on to say that Peter will express love for him by following him all the way to a death very much like his own. That doesn't sound like a lower expectation, but it is part of our calling, to follow, however imperfectly, wherever Christ would have us to go.

But what is the focus of the calling Jesus gives to Peter? How is he to express his love for Jesus? He is to feed his lambs, tend his sheep. The calling is to care for Jesus' followers as a shepherd cares for sheep, which seems like a simple image for pastoral ministry, and it certainly includes the care we give people. But in the ancient world, the term shepherd carried the weight of authority, and it is an image Jesus uses for himself. He says he is the Good Shepherd. So, Peter's calling is to follow Jesus not simply in the act of ordinary care, love, and support, but also in the role as a leader or guide.

Yet the central part of this calling is the care and love of people. In fact, the first thing we help people to do as leaders is to care for and love others, and we cannot teach anyone else to do something we are not

doing. Nurturing people in every way they need nurture lies at the heart of any ministry that is patterned after the example of Jesus. As he teaches, preaches, and heals, we are called to address people's needs, with all the resources of the Gospel, using the gifts God has provided us.

The first part of this has been talked about extensively in the church, the latter has not. Ministry is incarnational, it is personal. The good news of God's love in Christ is expressed in specific human beings, and thus, we must bring who we are to the sacred art of ministry. Michael, that includes your creativity, your boisterous laughter, your availability and presence, your awareness of how faith includes and transcends every dimension of the human personality, perhaps even your creative sense of time... is it Caribbean time you are on?

But we all have to bring who we are to other people in ministry, in addition to all the knowledge we gained in Divinity School about the great teachings of the church, and we have to bring our own personal experience with God, and you do bring all of this.

We also need to know what people are we called to care for and love, nurture and guide. Jesus' people, God's people — tend *my* sheep, Jesus says. Who might this include? Always more people than we think. In John 10:16, Jesus says, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold." We see one manifestation of this reality in the reading Michael has chosen from Acts 10, part of a much larger story which sets the stage for a significant trajectory of the Gospel.

Peter is involved again. We just can't seem to get away from this guy! The church has begun with only Jewish people, and Peter, always struggling to get things right, is convinced this is how things should be. But God gets through to him in a vision, God uses a centurion named Cornelius to confirm this vision, and Peter ends up baptizing Gentiles, saying, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" God's love is not just for one group of people, it extends to the whole world.

It is a lesson that is made clear in the early stages of the church, but it is a lesson that has had to be relearned over and over again for nearly 2,000 years. There is a bit of Peter in all of us, misplaced certainty, along with a desire to know who is in and who is out, who is God's and

who is not. God alone gets to make that decision, and God's desire is to include everyone. Peter's calling, as it continues to evolve beyond John into Acts, and our calling, is to include all, especially the people others might question or reject.

Doing so can bring an element of risk, but that too is part of what goes with our calling, and I know, Michael, it has become a central part of your journey. The struggle to get that right, to tend all the sheep when some of the sheep are not happy that *they* are getting care, and to care even for the unhappy ones — that struggle is not easy. Like Peter, we won't always get it right. But in the struggle to do so, ever in the context of grace, we reveal faith.

All of this may seem heavy, and I don't want to leave the impression that ministry is a tiresome burden. It is not. It is full of joy and fulfillment, and for all the challenges along the way, there are so many experiences of affirmation, so much support from others, so many times when we feel God's pleasure, that we could not choose any other path. But there is weight, humbling weight, to our calling.

When an older pastor I knew years ago was irritated by some stories of calling wherein the people said they resisted God's call, but God was so desperate to have them that God kept at it until they submitted, John said facetiously that he felt called when the preacher came to visit one day while he and his father were working in the corn field on a hot day. While he continued to work in the sun, his father and the preacher sipped lemonade in the shade on the porch. "That's when I felt called," he said with smirk, "That's what God wanted me to do."

Our calling is no frivolous matter. Sharing the Good News with others, being invited into people's lives at the highest and lowest points, serving as a bridge between God and people, is a sacred privilege, an incomparable gift. Michael, don't ever forget that or take it lightly, I know you won't; embrace it along with all the grace that comes too; and keep laughing and lifting up Christ in every way that you do.