When God Calls Your Name

Jennifer Fry

June 9/10, 2018

First, I just want to speak briefly about Annual Conference – I won’t say much, as I’m sure Amy, Jack, or David will say more later, since they were there for 4 days. We had several people at Lakeside representing our church. I went up on Tuesday for a couple of hours and found that Lakeside, even under gray skies, is beautiful, the town is charming, and I’m excited to go back next year as a representative of our church. Most, if not all, of the proceedings were live streamed as they happened, including Bishop Palmer’s Episcopal Address. If you haven’t had a chance to watch that, I encourage you to do so. Once you find the video on YouTube, Bishop starts at around 23 minutes; I guarantee it’s worth your time. Please keep our conference and our district in your prayers as everyone returns to their offices and churches and renews their work of making disciples for the transformation of the world. It looked like a great annual conference. I’ve been to annual conference for the Rio Grande Valley in Texas – it’s in a convention center in Corpus Christie. Bor-ing! West Ohio has their annual conference in historic Hoover Auditorium, built in 1928 as part of an original “Methodist Chautauqua”. It’s cool (figuratively and, this week, literally) and I hope that you’ll think about enjoying a few days respite next year with 2,000 other Methodists from West Ohio Conference! Think about that for just a minute: 2,000 disciples of Jesus Christ in one place at one time, worshipping him, doing the work of the church, and enjoying each other’s company.

Now … back to our regularly scheduled programming …

There’s an old joke about a young farmer, who, while standing in his field, observes a peculiar cloud formation. The clouds form the letters G, P, and C, and he thinks them a call from God: *Go preach Christ!* The farmer rushes to the deacons of his church and insists that he has been called to preach. Respectful of his ardor, they invite him to fill the pulpit.

That Sunday, the sermon is long, tedious, virtually incoherent. When it finally ends, the leaders sit in stunned silence. Finally, a wizened deacon mutters to the would-be preacher, "Seems to me the clouds were saying 'Go plant corn.'”

Let’s think about Simon-Peter and Andrew for a few minutes. Put yourselves in their sandals … you’re on a stinky fishing boat and you’ve had no luck all day. It’s hot. You’re tired. Your body hurts. You’re hungry. You might even be a little sea sick. Jesus shows up and he wants you to go back out so he can teach from the boat. So, back out you go. Jesus finishes, and now you’re thinking, “Thank goodness. I can go home, eat, and go to bed.” But, no, not yet --- Jesus has something else in mind and tells you to go further out and put down your nets again. Silently, you’re thinking, “Are you kidding me? What an incredible waste of time. We did this all day and there is NOTHING down there.” But you do it, because, well, he IS Jesus. When you pull those nets back up, they are full of fish. Probably more fish than you normally bring in in a week. I mean, there are A LOT of fish – you fill two boats. And your response? You fall to your knees and tell Jesus to go away, because you are not worthy. Thankfully, he doesn’t listen! And better yet, he says, “Drop everything you’re doing! Do not be afraid! From now on, you will fish for people.” And you DO IT. No idea where the next meal is coming from. Where the next bed will be. You just know that you have been called to follow that man. And Jesus just named his first two disciples in Peter and Andrew.

Disciple. Call. They aren’t difficult words, in fact, they flow off the tongue easily. Yet, they can strike fear in the hearts and minds of many. “Calling? What’s that? I don’t have a calling?” “I don’t want to be a disciple! That’s too much work.” “People don’t want to hear what I have to say. I can’t “convert” people.” Or, perhaps the most disheartening thing I’ve heard, “That would be too embarrassing!”

In April, our Assistant to the District Superintendent, Suzanne Allen (most of you remember her, right?) sent out an email to the District Lay Servant Ministries Committee. “Hope UMC in Franklin is asking for Pulpit Supply this Sunday. Can anyone assist?” I remember thinking, “How did I get on this list?” Oh, right. I joined the committee. And a few minutes later, I was thinking, “Thank God for Bill Smith” as he agreed to take on the assignment.

Around the same time, Amy asked me if I wanted to share a message in June, my first response was a wide eyed, “UH, I don’t think so”.

The week before Pentecost, a small church near here was looking for pulpit supply. Our District Superintendent, Todd Anderson, asked me personally to take it. I can imagine the look on my face. I was just there to talk about my Mutual Ministry Plan! I made a deal with Suzanne because I was afraid to preach in a different church on Pentecost. I said, “If you’ll send the call out to the pulpit supply list tonight, if no one else picks it up by 10am tomorrow, I’ll do it.” You probably heard my sigh of relief when someone picked it up. I am never going to live this down with Todd, and you know I’m on his list the next time an emergency comes up.

When the June Opportunities to Serve Sign Up Genius came out, I said to Amy, “I’m going to sign up to be a liturgist. That will get me used to being in front of people.” She said, “Are you sure you don’t want to preach in June?” I believe I still hemmed and hawed for a day or two, but here we are.

My point is that when God calls your name…. sometimes you just don’t want to listen. It’s hard. It requires stepping out of your comfort zone, a lot of prayer, and knowledge and belief that grace will follow you wherever you go. It takes bravery and maybe a little dumb luck to stand up here and pretend you know what you’re doing, when you really feel like you aren’t at all qualified.

Disciples. Discipleship. Immediately we think of one of the twelve: Matthew, Peter, James, John, Andrew. And we think … “They were disciples. They were the chosen ones, not me. Pastors are disciples. Missionaries are disciples. I cannot possibly be a disciple. I don’t have time to be a disciple.” But I’m here to tell you that every single one of us in this place today is a Disciple of Jesus Christ. We aren’t here because we like jumping out of bed early on one of our two days off a week. We are here because we want to learn more about him, deepen our faith, worship him, and become more like him.

I googled “define disciple”:

1. Religion.
   1. one of the 12 personal followers of Christ.
   2. one of the 70 followers sent forth by Christ. Luke 10:1.
   3. any other professed follower of Christ in His lifetime.
2. any follower of Christ.

I also found this definition: One who reflects Jesus. I like the way JH Arnold puts it in his book, Discipleship, “Discipleship is not a question of our own doing; it is a matter of making room for God so that he can live in us.”

In thinking about my own reluctance, I started thinking about other “reluctant disciples”. First was Saul of Tarsus, also known as Paul – most certainly a reluctant disciple. Saul was persecuting Christians, for heaven’s sake. He was going to Damascus that day to arrest Christians. God blinded him – I think to make him slow down, stop, and think about what he was doing. After he was healed, Paul began a long arduous career of teaching people about Christ and the love and grace he brings to everyone. He was persecuted for his faith, he was imprisoned, he was stoned, he spent a lot of time fleeing for his safety because people kept plotting to kill him. He paid the price, but, man, did he love Jesus and have the utmost faith and trust in God. He was definitely a reluctant disciple, but he embraced it full on when he gave in.

I’ve recently been reading a book by David C. Downing called The Reluctant Convert, about C.S. Lewis’ conversion to a life in Christ. Until the age of 9, Lewis had a pretty normal upbringing, including a child’s view of faith in God. At age 9, though, Lewis’ mother died of cancer and shortly thereafter his father sent him away to boarding school, where, Downing says, he and his brother were brutalized by the headmaster. At the age of 17, Lewis said to a friend, “I believe in no religion. There is absolutely no proof for any of them, and from a philosophical standpoint, Christianity is not even the best.” During WWII, he was wounded in battle and was later heard boasting that he, “never sank so low as to pray”. For 15 years, Lewis, was on a quest to “find Joy” – without God. He dabbled in the occult, was a self-professed atheist, and scoffed at his friends who were Christians. He tried to find any proof that God did not exist. He spent years in discussion and debate with J.R.R Tolkein and other friends, often trying to convince them God wasn’t real. In his book, “Surprised by Joy”, he says, “In 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed; perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.” Perhaps his heart, too, had been strangely warmed? Folks, one of the most well-known Christian authors was a reluctant disciple.

How about Moses? God tells him to go and bring the Israelites out of Egypt. And Moses says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” A few versus later, after God shows him all he can do, Moses says, “Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.” God tells Moses that he will help him speak, and still Moses says, “Pardon your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.” Talk about a reluctant disciple… thank goodness he stopped objecting!

I often wish that I could take the words from multiple translations of the bible or even the same stories from the different gospels, and meld them into a scripture that is pleasing to my ear. Our scripture from Luke provides so much more content than the other gospels, but depending on the translation it commonly says, “you will fish for people” or “you will catch people.” I just find the phrasing kind of anti-climactic, after such an awesome story. The King James Version of the verse from Matthew is my favorite: “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” It probably sounds more dramatic, I don’t know, but it’s got a ring to it. “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

As a child, I, and I suspect many other people, imagined a sea full of men, being caught in a net and pulled into a boat, or snagged on a hook and reeled in on a fishing pole. But being called by God to do something is quite a bit subtler…. It’s Tracey Chambers just happening to have the CLMA brochure in her bag at Lay Servant Ministries training. It’s David Finney telling me what I think was a dozen times (and was probably only two) when the next CLM Academy starts. It’s the CLMA brochure from Tracey Chambers that you were sure you threw away, popping out from under the seat of your car when you were cleaning it. It’s a class with Doug Dean where every week you had an aha moment, and sometimes two or three. It’s that STUPID brochure popping up again when you’re cleaning out an end table. Okay, maybe it’s not so subtle. I was so incredibly stubborn that I completed my CLMA application and got my references in w/in days of the committee meeting to review them. That night, I called Pastor Sister and started the conversation with “How old were you when you realized you were being called to ministry?” “48”, she said. I might have sighed and she laughed, because she so gets where I am right no… trying to discern my call and how to do it. I asked how she finally realized she was being called to be a pastor and she said, “God spoke to me”. I remember the day she told me that 22 years ago and I said to my mother, “She’s crazy! God doesn’t speak to people.” Now I know how God speaks to people… I almost missed out on one of the greatest experiences of my life, because I was busy being a reluctant disciple and doing my darnedest not to listen.

As I was trying to reimagine my life after the death of my parents, Suzanne mentioned District Lay Servant Ministries training and I thought, “Why not?”. If I’m being honest, I remember telling someone I was doing it because Suzanne asked me to. HA! It took three hours on that first Friday night to make me realize I was doing this for a whole host of reasons, and not even one of them was related to Suzanne. I have been exposed to amazing people, and developed such a deeper life in Christ since I started this Journey in 2014. I’ve learned to be more compassionate and empathetic. It’s changed my heart, it’s opened my eyes, it’s changed my life. I still have my moments, but I know I’m a different person than I was just four years ago, and certainly a different person than I was eight years ago.

I can’t tell you when the realization came to me that \*\*I\*\* was a disciple of Christ. I *can* tell you when I decided I wanted to help others experience what I had experienced … A group of 6 or 8 of us had just finished Covenant with Doug, and the bible had come alive for me. The stories I knew as a child suddenly took on new meaning. Scripture that never made sense before, began to make sense. Even John 1:1 – you know, THE WORD -- started to make a little more sense.

Did I have to become a Certified Lay Minister to do this? I didn’t. However, I firmly believe that God puts you where you need to be when you need to be there. Our first class was on calling. I don’t think I realized until that class that I had a calling. But as I listened to the Rev. Dwight Bowers talk about calling that day, an idea started to form.

Our second class was about Discipleship. We were assigned to read a text by Greg Ogden called Transforming Discipleship. I was hooked before I got out of the introduction. I could NOT put the book down. It looks like a roadmap with all my underlining. It just clicked. And I realized that God had put me there, in that place, in that time, to read that book – I guarantee you I wouldn’t have picked it up otherwise. There wasn’t a baker who solves murders in her spare time or a cat with extra sensory perception who helps a billionaire solve murders.

From that book, I began to understand something. Being a disciple and making disciples doesn’t have to be a grand gesture. It doesn’t mean you have to go out onto the streets of some big city and witness to people. You don’t have to teach a huge class full of people. You don’t have to stand up here every week and share a message with you. But you can make a difference, and make disciples, in other ways. First, live our lives in such a way that Christ can be seen in everything we do. Come to church and worship. Find a small group and become a regular member – or START A SMALL group if there’s not one that works for you. I’ve started a small home group and do a study with three other women who have enriched my life in ways I never imagined. I’d like to think that all four us would tell you we’ve been blessed in more than ways than one by each other’s presence in our lives. Right now, I feel like that’s my calling as a CLM – to work on growing small groups in our church. (Now that I’ve spilled the beans – no ignoring me when I start calling or messaging!!)

When our youth group goes to someone’s home to do yard clean up. When Kim takes a group of kids to Hope House to make dinner and fellowship with the women there. Being kind in the face of anger. Listening when someone needs you to hear. When you pick up a kid who’s fallen and scrapped their knee. When you say a prayer for someone who is sick or hurting. These are all ways we show the love of Christ to others, and how we start to make disciples for Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

In Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus said to the disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations….” I can do that and more importantly YOU can do that.

My prayer today is that you will spend time in discernment about how you can make disciples of Jesus Christ – and that when God calls *your* name, you aren’t as stubborn as I was. I delayed my own growth for almost two years by being stubborn, I hope you’ll listen long before I did.