

“The Path of Prayer”

I am going to ask what will seem to be a strange question especially for church. I do not want you to answer verbally or by raising your hand. Simply answer this question in your heart. Do you believe in God? As you ponder this you are welcome to have doubts. You can feel uncertain or not 100% sure. You can think “Well I did last week, but this week I am a bit skeptical.” You can be like a friend who told me she had believed in God as long as she could remember and never had a doubt in the world.

Here is another maybe harder question. Do you believe in God deeply enough to do whatever God calls you to do? As you ponder this question in your heart I would like you to consider this as a no-holds-barred question. I allowed that you could equivocate with the first question, but for this one no. Regardless of what God asked you to do would you do it.

This is a tough question because we are used to making decisions based on our own desires and judgements. Certain decisions like a major purchase we might go to Consumer Reports and look at what they advise with regard to a car, refrigerator, or television. But how many of us seek God’s counsel about whether or not to make the purchase to begin with?

Decisions such as job changes or college choices again involve information gathering including interviews, visits, rankings, and talking to current employees or students. But how many of us ask God should we change our job or where to go to college or even if this we should be making such a move to begin with?

Other major life decisions such as getting married or having a child tend to be based on our emotions. We may have dated someone for years and even been to premarital counseling, but do we ask God if this is what God wants for us?

Then there are decisions that are really not decisions at all but based on the whim of the moment. That is how we get in trouble at the checkout counter in the grocery store or Marshall’s—impulse buying. That is why the candy and trashy magazines are there at the checkout. We make the purchase in the moment without giving it a thought. We just fling the candy or magazine on the counter and it is rung up before we have time to actually consider it.

I expect in one or more of these scenarios we might feel some anxiety or resentment at the idea of bringing God into our decision-making. After all we are old enough to make our own decisions. That is what we were reared to do by our parents and taught to do by teachers. What is the point of all of this preparation if we have to seek the guidance of God for everything? Yet I know I would have saved myself a lot of disappointment and heartache if I had involved God in more of my decisions, and then listened to the guidance God offered me.

Even if we resist the idea of seeking God’s guidance, there is another way God engages with us and that is calling on us. In other words, we may not call home for guidance, but home is going to be calling out to us even when we are not looking for direction. We can avoid answering the call but God is persistent. Soon our inbox will be full of messages so it is best to accept the call, because God does not give up.

In today's readings we hear about Abram being called by God to go on a journey and Matthew being called to follow Jesus. What I find remarkable in both of these call stories is that we do not hear any words of reluctance or resistance. That is quite remarkable considering that when prophets are called in the Bible one part of their call story is to make excuses why they should not be a prophet. Think of Moses the first of the prophets. When he encounters God in the burning bush he tells God that he is, "slow of speech and slow of tongue."¹ Jeremiah also claimed not be able to speak for he was only a boy.² Isaiah says he is a "man of unclean lips,"³ and therefore not fit to speak God's words. Neither Abram or Matthew push back with excuses.

What's more, while prophesying is no picnic, Abram is asked to pack up everything including his household goods, family members, slaves and livestock and start moving. God does not give directions, tell Abram his specific destination, and he certainly does not tell Abram why. God just says go, and Abram does as he is told. Likewise, with Matthew and the other disciples Jesus tells them to follow and they do. He does not even tell Matthew what he is being called to do. Matthew leaves behind a lucrative position as tax collector for Rome to follow an itinerant Rabbi whom he has never met before. When God called Abram and Matthew they listened and followed.

Ascertaining a true call can be difficult. Abram and Matthew seemed to be able to do it without any problem. As you know, I recently perceived a call that did not work this way. I answered what I believed to be a call to serve as Dean of the Cathedral in Wyoming. Despite lingering doubts I believed I was being called to serve there. It was only at the eleventh hour that God's message broke through the noise and revealed that my calling is to continue to serve here.

We do not know from the text, but I think that Abram and Matthew had tried and true lines of communication open with God so that when they received their calls they could answer quickly and confidently. That is why a custom of prayer over even the small decisions is an important one. It keeps us ready and able to go in prayer on the big decisions. It is like having a well-worn path between our house and that of our best friend. There is no struggling to figure out how to get there, we just follow the path we have worn in the grass. A path we can follow in the dark or the light. A path that we can follow on autopilot. We don't have to pay attention our feet know the way. The kind of path that was created by love, respect, and confidence in the conversation we have with the living God.

¹ Exodus 4:10

² Jeremiah 1:6

³ Isaiah 6:5