

### “CALLING ALL MINISTERS”

We are in the season of Epiphany. Many people blur the stories of Christmas together, and assume the wise men were there at the birth. Most crèche scenes put everyone at the scene though the wise men came much later. As the legend goes they saw a star in the East. They traveled from afar. Epiphany is the season that we celebrate God’s manifestation breaking into the ordinary changing the course of events through the living of people of faith, like you and me. This was not a once and for all event; God continues to be made manifest in the world and we still have the opportunity to respond to them. Yet I believe that many of those manifestations go unnoticed because we are not paying attention. We let the world wear down our sense of wonder or we are just too busy to notice. G.K. Chesterton said it simply, “The world does not lack for wonders, only for a sense of wonder.”

I love those experiences that just stop me in my tracks and make me feel something I don’t expect, to think thoughts that are new and remind me how big the world is. One time when driving into Chicago I had breezed through the city (which is a miracle in itself) and was on my way into the suburbs as the sun was setting. I turned west and saw the most amazing cloud formation I had ever seen. Most of the sky was clear but there was a band of clouds stretching as far as I could see that looked like a river. It was as if someone painted it in the sky. I can’t adequately describe it, but it was incredibly beautiful and moved me in a very unexpected way.

Movies often do that to me as well. I think it is the darkness and the big screen. We recently rented *As Good as It Gets* with Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt. I was reminded how deeply I had been moved in the theatre some years ago. I laughed, I cried, I got angry, but when I walked back out into the daylight I felt new and alive in a way that I hadn’t before the experience. If you have seen this movie you might not have reacted in the same way. I have often told people about movies that I love only to find out they hated it. Some people are deeply moved by opera---I don’t get it. It bores me out of my mind. That is human nature---what might move you will leave me cold and vice versa. Not everybody saw the star in the East. God can be manifest for us in all sorts of different ways, but you still have to pay attention.

In *As Good as It Gets* Jack Nicholson plays a deeply neurotic, mean spirited author of romance novels. And a very successful one at that. He says some of the most hateful things you could possibly imagine to other people around him. The other two major characters are a waitress who serves him in his local hangout and his next door neighbor, a gay artist, who suffers unmercifully at the mouth of the sharp tongued Nicholson. Without going into detail the plot unfolds in a miraculous sharing of their gifts with one another that brings out the full humanity of all three of them. It is a film about ministry, about healing, about being anointed with the Spirit. It is not explicitly religious, but I think one of the most beautifully implicit religious stories I have ever seen. For me it was a revelation, an epiphany, and manifestation of God’s love.

Listen to these words of Henri Nouwen: “Aren’t you like me, hoping that some person, thing or event will come along to give you that final feeling of inner well-being you desire? Don’t you often hope may this book, idea, course, trip, job or relationship fulfill my deepest desire? But as long as you are waiting for that mysterious moment you will go on running helter-skelter, always anxious and restless, always lustful and angry, never fully satisfied. You know that this is the compulsiveness that keeps us going and busy, but at the same time makes us wonder whether we are getting anywhere in the long run. This is the way to spiritual exhaustion and burn out.” (*Life of the Beloved*, p. 30)

This passage in Luke is a pivotal moment in the gospels. It is an epiphany. Jesus is baptized by John like many others who had come to him. Yet this time the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended and a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” Notice the voice does not say “If you manage to carry out the tasks I have set before you, bringing success, you will earn my love and respect.” It is an anointing. It says, “I am pleased with you now.” It is a vocation, a calling for ministry. The affirmation of the God’s love given, not earned provides the foundation. God announced to the world that this young man had something special to offer, and that God had called him in a very special way to share his gifts.

And what seems clear to me is that this young man grew into himself in such a way that he did not doubt his calling or his being called the Beloved. He touched people, healed people, and brought the very best out of people in a way that would forever change the world. God's spirit in the flesh. And I believe we are called to do exactly the same thing. We have to accept that same affirmation---we are loved now as we are, we are the Beloved. We need to embody the same spirit Jesus did and therefore are enabled to do our part in building the kingdom. There is a powerful strand of Christianity whose main focus is getting into heaven. Their key to life is getting to the next one. I just don't believe that. I don't believe for a minute that Jesus came to get us into another life; I believe firmly that Jesus came so that we can get the most out of this one.

One of the early church fathers, Iraneaus said it this way: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." We give God glory when we live our lives to the fullest. We also give God glory when we act in such a way that others lives are brought to their fullest. Look at Jesus' short time on earth. In instance after instance Jesus brought people to life and taught his disciples to do the same. And Jesus began with those who were in the greatest need---those who were marginalized, the poor, widows and orphans, the sick, the lame. Where lives had been diminished, he sought to lift them up. It is hard to imagine, but the world didn't like this plan one bit. It was terribly threatening to those who were in power, both political and religious authorities. The cross was the world thumbing its nose at God, but God was not deterred. That is what resurrection is all about--Jesus didn't give up and God did not give up on Jesus. The anointing in life carried on beyond his death. The victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power.

As I thought this week about vocation, about being called into ministry, I thought about my own ordination service. I was ordained at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Laingsburg, Michigan in 1985. Surrounded by the congregation I had been serving for a year, my family and friends, they laid their hands on me. A very significant person in my life at that time, Rev. Christopher Miller shared these words with those who were gathered. "Most of us are not good at recognizing and attending to that still small voice, anymore than the disciples on the road to Emmaus immediately recognized Christ walking with them. We need each other to help us identify, hear, and follow that voice, just as the disciples needed each other. This is the function of the church at its best---a place where two or more gather in such a way that the still small voice is heard by each of us, guiding, challenging, and calling us to be who God would have us to be calling us to our true selves." Then Christopher looked at me and said, "Brian, having experienced this and courageously attending to your call despite other temptations and distractions, and having discerned the pain in yourself and others close to you when they have lost themselves, I challenge you to interact with your congregation in such a way that each of them comes to know who they are before God. Tune their ears to that still small voice that they and you might recognize Christ's presence already in your midst."

I remember my ordination, but do you remember yours? "Is that a trick question? I was never ordained." Ah, but you were! You are a minister of the gospel. In the early rites of baptism the church made this clear. The newly baptized Christian was given a white robe, symbolic of new life that was now being lived. Hands were laid on the head, a sign of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the empowerment to be in ministry with Christ in the world. Through the course of time baptism has lost its significance as the making of "priests" in the world and became only a rite of initiation into the church. This led many to the unfortunate conclusion that pastors, those who are ordained are the real ministers of the church and the laity is there to support the clergy. I think that is a gross deviation from what the early church believed and what Jesus called us to be.

Just before I left Grand Rapids I was invited to the PARA staff retreat. PARA works with UN refugees working with organizations to get them settled in cities in the US. They wanted me to share my experience with refugee resettlement at my last three churches. They hoped to find more effective ways to recruit churches and to work with them once the refugees had arrived. I have worked with refugees from Vietnam, Bosnia, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Sudan and Uzbekistan most recently. The more we talked the more I realized how much of my ministry was not the work itself, but empowering lay people like you to do the work. I firmly believe that work like this not only builds the kingdom, but lifts up those who do it. And as we succeed we can be bolder because we know we can do it.

William Sloane Coffin writes, "Essentially every church, every personal vocation represents love in search of form." Love in search of form---what a simple and beautiful definition of all that the church stands for. We are constantly searching for the form, the stuff of our ministry. It can be big like refugee work, or it

can be as simple as when someone comes to me and asks if they can take food to someone who got home from the hospital. Love in search of form.

The glory of God is a human being fully alive. Don't leave this sanctuary this morning without hearing that still small voice calling you the Beloved. Confident in that love you can let your love find form. Find someone, some great project that will allow you to use your gifts to touch others and to be touched deeply in return.