

## **Homily – Called Into Union With God**

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Back in the 1960s my grandparents retired from a small lot in a suburb of New York City and moved to a sprawling 160 acre farm in Upstate New York. For the next forty years they converted that farm into a home for themselves and for the rest of the extended family. Ask most in my family about their favorite place on Earth and they answer with the Farm, or more specifically sitting on or in the Pond at the Farm. Jeff was wise enough to recognize this, and he chose the dock at the Pond as the place to propose marriage. The Farm has very special memories. It is a place that calls to us. It calls for us to come home. It is a place that calls for us to move away from the busyness and our false sense of self. It is a place that calls us back to the earth and the way God created us to be. Maybe you are fortunate enough to have a call like this. What calls to you?

This morning's Bible readings are about God calling. God calls to Jonah to go to Nineveh to tell them repent. And, God calls to the Psalmist and it is a call to hope, salvation, and safety. Then, God calls to those in the early church. This is a call to know that there is something grander than the daily stressors of this world. And, in our Gospel reading Jesus calls to Simon, later known as Peter, Andrew, James, and John. There is speculation from some scholars that the four fishermen already had experienced Jesus so their immediate answer to the call was no surprise. Others marvel at the sudden nature of the response from the four. I think the answer is somewhere in the middle, and that God's call happens in a plethora of ways, and it is normal for us to answer in very individual ways. There is beauty in this diversity, but I wonder why Zebedee and the hired men were left in the boat to keep working. Jesus didn't call them. Why does Jesus call some and not others? I guess we just have to trust that God calls each of us at just the right time and in just the right way.

And, I think a real call from God is about call into union with God. It is a call into relationship with God. Today's psalm has a good description of a real call from God. *"For God alone my soul in silence waits; truly, my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold, so that I shall not be shaken. In God is my safety and my honor; God is my strong rock and my refuge. Put your trust in him always, O people, pour out your hearts before him, for God is our refuge."* This is a description of a holy call from God.

Now, I want to digress for a moment and talk about a call that is a call but it is a bit different than Jesus' call to the four Disciples. Wouldn't that be nice to have a ready-made way to answer some of life's hardest questions? Can God help us discern?

Is this the right person to marry?  
Should I sell my house and move into a retirement community?  
How should I take care of an aging parent?  
Should I choose Stanford or Cal?  
When can I quit my dreaded job?  
Should I have children and when?  
Should I get a dog?  
Should I do chemotherapy or go straight to radical surgery?  
When should I finally tithe ten percent of my income to St. Barnabas?

Sometimes the questions of life are easy and sometimes they are difficult. And, sometimes the difficult life questions happen all at the same time, and we feel buried by the weight of them. In one of her Harry Potter books, J.K. Rowling writes, "It is our choices...that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities." We must discern our own choices in life, for this leads to mental and spiritual health.

Many of us are good at considering our physical health when discerning a tough choice in life. Whether it is a medical decision or a life style decision, we often reflect on our physical health when making these choices. And, we are getting better at recognizing that proper discernment is good for our mental health. When we choose actions that are congruent with our values it lifts our self-esteem and our mental health. And good choices are important for our spiritual health. How often do you include God in your choices?

When we talk to God or pray about our life choices then it leads to better discernment and improved health. When we follow the example of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus then it leads to better discernment and improved health. Somehow, as we draw closer to Jesus, it becomes easier to discern. When we determine whether a decision will draw us into closer relationship with God, when we consider the impact of our actions on the physical, mental and spiritual health of others, when we talk to others in the community of God about our choices then all of these can lead to better discernment and improved spiritual health. As followers of Jesus there are things we can do to help us in our day to day decisions and in our life choices. Leaning on God for help with discernment is important, but I want to get back to Jesus' call to the four fishermen in today's Gospel reading. He is calling them for something bigger than the discernment of choices in daily life. Jesus is calling them follow him so that he can teach them how to be in union with God, and by extension they can teach others about this same oneness.

I believe that being one with God is central to the consciousness of Jesus. His whole life flowed out this fundamental awareness. Through his actions, words, deeds, and teachings, through his life, death and resurrection, all of these things lead each and

every one of US into union with God. I am convinced that this oneness is something to be prioritized and cultivated. Even as the second part of the Trinity, Jesus himself had to grow physically, psychologically, and spiritually so that he was in perfect union with God. Sometimes we like to think Jesus was fully formed when he came out of Mary's womb, but to fully honor the humanity of Jesus we need to allow him the ability to grow into an adult that has perfected his union with God. This is the testimony and example that we have from Scripture and from Jesus.

Last week, I started an online class about Celtic spirituality and mysticism. So today, you are going to start hearing about mystics. Often it is difficult to put into words or convey the awesome nature of oneness with God. But, throughout the ages some mystics have found ways to do this. Somehow these mystics have overcome the boundaries that most of us place between God and mortals. The mystics point to a center of their deepest knowing in which they are one with the Beloved. And as they go further in this journey of love into the Beloved, the boundaries between God and self become fuzzy. "Cynthia Bourgeault states, "As we move toward our center, our own being and the divine being become more and more mysteriously interwoven." In the fourteenth century, Meister Eckhart speaks of a place in the depths of our soul in which God alone can dwell and in which we dwell in God. Meeting God in this place, we are invited to sink into what Meister Eckhart calls "the eternity of the Divine essence." However, in doing so, we never become the Divine essence. This is because "God has left a little point wherein the soul turns back on itself and finds itself, and knows itself to be a creature." The Christian mystics do not confuse themselves and God. They know that in union with God, human personality is neither lost nor converted into divine personality. But they also know the profound inadequacy of language to either hold or communicate these deep mysteries.

Now, I have been blessed to have known several people for whom union with God was not just a momentary experience but a relatively stable part of their ongoing journey. And, what struck me most as I related to them over time was that their ever-deepening journey into God made them more deeply human, not less human. None of these followers of Jesus showed an avoidance of the realities of life, and none seemed to use their spiritual experience as an escape. And, one of the things that I noticed is that each had established a contemplative dimension to their life, AND they all were active serving others in the world." St. Benedict is famous for having noted that a Godly life has both "ora" and "labora." This is Latin for prayer and work. A balance of contemplation and service are both necessary for deepening union with God.

Now, for the last few minutes, I have been using words to help your mind and intellect understand Jesus' call for us to be in union with God. But now, I want to shift and see if I can relate this concept to your heart in addition to the head. Liminal space is a term that I have introduced before, and it is that special moment in time in

which we feel connected to all that is around us. Liminal moments are when we feel we are standing at the threshold of infinity. It is that bigger than life twinkling that two weeks ago, I described as watching a baby play, or hearing music that inspires. Poetry can often be effective in helping us get outside ourselves. If you let it then well done poetry touches us inside the heart. Thunderstorms are not something that we have very often here in California, and I miss them. For me, thunderstorms and heavy snow storms are moments in which life seems to pause, and we are reminded there are things that are much larger, much grander.

Here are other evocative moments. Sometimes we have moments when we are selfless in love with another. And, sometimes a sight, smell or taste can evoke a deep memory of wholeness and contentment. This sense of serenity is more than a feeling. It is a connectedness that is essentially a glimmer of Holy Spirit. It reflects the truth that we were created to be in relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation.

And let me introduce a concept that may help you connect your heart to oneness. Last week, there was a term I learned about called "topophilia". "Topo" is Latin for place, and "philia" is Latin for love. So, topophilia is love of place. In other words, it is that warm feelings you get from a place. It is a vivid, emotional, and personal experience that leads to unexplainable affections. Topophilia is a spiritual connection, especially with nature. Topophilia can be evoked by a smell or a sound. For some crisp autumn wind may evoke a visceral memory. Topophilia may be related to childhood, but it can also develop as an adult. I used to get this feeling when I drove up to the family farm. Think about the place or places that evoke this feeling of home for you. Topophilia, love of a place, is the way that it feels to be in union with God.

I have never lived the family Farm in Upstate New York, but I hope to spend a month there with my mother during my upcoming three month sabbatical. The Farm is a place in which I feel topophilia. I feel close the land and nature. I feel close to my roots. I feel the presence of God. Whether it is topophilia or some other connection, I hope you feel this union with God and that as you get older you feel it more frequently. Jesus is calling, and we are made to leave our old life behind and live into oneness with God. Come home to union with God.