

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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Have you ever gotten yourself into a situation where you feel like you're in over your head, in so deep that you're floundering to get out? All of a sudden, you find yourself in a place where it's way more than you bargained for.

I can't help but think about the people on Capitol Hill who are working on health care reform right now. This current impasse is *not* what they were expecting. Regardless of what side the politicians are on, I get the feeling that they've gotten in a little bit deeper than they anticipated. Initially they sensed a pressing need, a call from the citizens, to reform the current system, but now a lot of them are left scratching their heads, probably asking themselves, "What in the world did we get ourselves into?"

What in the world *did* we get ourselves into? As seminarians, I think Crystal and I ask ourselves that very question once in a while. This whole seminary thing, this "call" to ministry, can seem so overwhelming, like we're in over our heads. I find myself sometimes capturing Isaiah's mood: not me, Lord! I'm not cut out for this!

In seminary, we talk a lot about our call to ministry, both individually and as a people. We like to use the word, "vocation." You've probably heard the word before, but it has a different meaning than what you might normally encounter, like vocational training for a job. We've seriously told our call stories so many times that we really should just open a business as vocational consultants on the side.

So what is a calling, a vocation? The best definition of vocation that I've ever heard comes from Frederick Buechner, an American writer and theologian. He said, "The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." There's a lot to unpack there. Let me say it again. "The place God calls you to is where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."

*Deep gladness*: that which brings you untold happiness. Where do *you* find your gladness? Maybe it's in your job. Maybe you find it when you volunteer at the Lakeview Pantry. Maybe it comes from being in a relationship with your spouse or partner or experiencing the world through the eyes of your child. We don't all find happiness in the same place.

*Deep hunger*: the suffering and pain of this weary world. The earthquake-shattered nation of Haiti. A lonely friend who just needs somebody to sit with her. Our homeless sisters and brothers on the freezing streets of Chicago. A sick child who needs to be cared for.

Although Frederick Buechner's quote mentions God, it's not very churchy at all; in fact, I think he does a really good job of taking this really religious idea of a calling outside the walls of the church, beyond just church workers, and extends it to all people, in all spheres of everyday life: employed and unemployed, for-profit and volunteer, abled and disabled, partnered and single, younger and older.

So do *you* feel like you're in over your head? The idea that God is calling us as individuals, and as a people, can feel overwhelming, especially when our world's problems are so great. Can't we just live our everyday lives, God? Isn't it enough that I'm here this morning? I suspect that we have some visitors who are feeling in over their heads just being here inside a church. Now you're telling me that God is calling me?

In today's readings, we find Isaiah and Peter being called to serve God and others in the midst of everyday life. They both felt like they were in way over their heads, that they weren't cut out for this *deep* God-stuff.

For starters, Isaiah wasn't a card-carrying member of the clergy. He had literally just walked off the streets into the temple. Although the passage seems a little ambiguous, we know that because verse 4 tells us, "The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called..." The pivots were the posts of the doorway of the temple, meaning he was standing on the outside looking in.

Similarly, Peter was just a fisherman, a common trade in the ancient world. Jesus told Peter to throw his net into the lake, even though Peter hadn't caught anything all night. They ended up catching so many fish that the boat started to sink. This is honestly scary stuff. The boat is sinking! In just a moment, they're gonna be way in over their heads in deep water. No wonder Peter wants out. Peter cries, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" This is more than he bargained for. But Jesus promises him that there's nothing to fear with this call, saying, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people."

Serving God and others in everyday life, locating our *deep* gladness amidst the *deep* hunger of this world, is where God is calling us. God first calls us by name in baptism. The Christian life is living in over our heads in the waters of baptism, immersing ourselves in the deep water and walking wet wherever we go. When we enter this space, we're encouraged to dip our hands deep into the baptismal font and drench our foreheads with water, as a sign of God's love and mercy that's raining down upon us. Wherever we go, we have Jesus' promise that we don't have to be afraid of our call, that we're able to bring our deep gladness to bear on the deep hunger of this world.

*Deep* gladness, *deep* hunger, *deep* water: maybe going deep, being in over our heads, is precisely where God wants us to be.