

But Can I Be Sure?
Romans 8:18-27

On the back of the worship bulletin, perhaps for the benefit of visitors, appeared a list of the church staff, names and positions. Under “Ministers”, leading the list was “The entire congregation”. What did that mean? Was the staff crying out for help with the work? Was it a declaration: there is enough blame to go around here? Was this a gentle prodding of an apathetic congregation? Or maybe it was, in fact, a statement of the case; every member was busy in witness and service.

Whether or not the entire congregation was involved in the practice of ministry, the description is biblically and theologically correct. To each member God has given a gift, a grace, an ability to be lived out in service (Rom. 12:3-8), but the congregation as a whole is also to minister. God calls a people, a community to be a temple where God dwells, to be a nation of priests, serving, praying, welcoming, being the way God is in the world (1 Pet. 2:9-10). To claim to be privately Christian but to regard participation in the community of faith and service as optional is totally erroneous. That the entire congregation functions as a minister is scripturally and historically and practically true.

But the worship bulletin that begins the list of ministers with “The entire congregation” goes on to name individuals as pastors, teachers, preachers, evangelists, and missionaries. These are called to be leaders of the people of God, equipped by God with the gifts and graces appropriate to their several duties (Eph. 4:11-16). To these ministries they have been set apart. At some time in their lives, suddenly or slowly, dramatically or in whispers, they had heard God’s call to ministry. They have prayed, listened to their seniors in service, been counseled in the process of discerning God’s call, submitted to the educational and experiential requirements, and after prayerful and careful examination of life and faith, received the confirmation of the church.

This process, so briefly described, is neither swift nor easy. It is difficult, full of sleepless nights, long walks, longer conversations, and even longer prayers. One asks and is asked by others, “Do I have the gifts and graces for ministry?” Who can say for sure? By gifts and graces do we mean one is friendly, extroverted, able to speak publicly, and of good reputation? Perhaps; those are qualities admirable and to be desired. But a person reticent and undersocialized may in time grow into a life fitted beautifully for Christian service. Sometimes persons rise to the top who lack all those immediate gifts which tend to detain you at the bottom. And it is not uncommon for gifts for ministry not even to appear until a crisis or a strong need sounds reveille and every quality of mind, body, and soul bends to the task.

In other words, is there in me any evidence, discernible to me and to the community of faith, that God is calling me into the ministry? I might offer in evidence feelings I had the final night of church camp when we circled a small lake, each holding a candle, and singing “O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee”. Such feelings are not to be

discarded when morning comes and the church bus rolls toward home and the “real world” reappears. Or I might recall the care and comfort offered stray cats and dogs, or the deep satisfaction felt when singing and offering gifts at the nursing home. Genuine and important, to be sure, but from these and similar experiences, am I to announce to family and church, I have been called into the ministry?

We are instructed by Scripture that God does not call all ministers in the same way. God speaks, says one writer, in a variety of ways through different means (Heb. 1:1). Some of the ways are dramatic: Moses sees a bush burning but not consumed; Isaiah has a vision in the temple; Paul is knocked to the ground, puzzled and blind. Other calls are not shouts but whispers: Elijah heard God not in wind and fire but in a still, small voice; Samuel, while still a boy, needed help to distinguish between God’s call and that of the old priest Eli; Saul was out looking for his father’s donkeys that had escaped the corral when he met an old man of God in the road; James and John were fishing with their father when they heard a stranger say “Follow me.”

Nor do all those called have the same degree of certainty about the call. Gideon asked for a sign so he could be sure. He laid a fleece on the threshing floor, asking God to let the fleece be wet with dew and the ground dry. It was so, but Gideon was not fully persuaded. He asked God to reverse the miracle and it was so. He accepted God’s call (Judg. 6:36-40). Deborah saw in her achievements of leadership the hand of God while all around her strong men were saying, “But you are a woman” (Judg. 4-5). Saul at times was confident God had called him to lead Israel, but before strong enemies he became uncertain and afraid. He frantically searched for clear confirmation. Finally, in desperation he disguised himself and went to a fortune teller: “Woman, I have to know!” (1 Sam. 28). And yet his namesake, Saul (Paul) of Tarsus was absolutely certain of his call when many around him doubted and called him an imposter. Necessity is laid on me; preaching is my God-given destiny, he said. God has set me apart, he said. I am an apostle by God’s authority, he said; not by human approval.

If only I could be as sure. Jesus stood in the streets of Jerusalem and at a critical moment lifted his voice in prayer: “Father, glorify your name.” God answered, “I have glorified it before and I will again.” But among those standing by, some said they heard an angel; others said they heard thunder (John 12:27-29).

Who among us has not raised the question with oneself: What did I really hear? God’s call? A vaguely religious experience? Or did I misinterpret a natural event (thunder) and for a moment think I was called to ministry? A college student in Colorado, contemplating Christian ministry but not too free in talking about it, lingered outside the church after all the other youth had left for home, or dorm, or work, or party. The student pulled a handful of grass and tossed it on the hood of a car. “If you want me to be a minister, blow the grass off the car.” The grass did not move, but the student did – into the ministry. Years later he answered the question Why? When the grass remained on the car: “What kind of God would do what I demanded?” Sometimes a sign is not a sign; how one reads it depends on many factors.

Still the appetite for certainty is strong; some outside confirmation would be most welcome. But sometimes such assurance is lacking, even in one's own family. Often God calls a woman or man into the ministry in a voice not loud enough for the whole family to hear. At an ordination service, one may recognize among the attendees the family of the ordained by the wide-eyed surprised look on their faces.

This quest for certainty may not end with entrance into ministry; it may surface time and again during ministry, especially when passion cools or when problems arise which seem to say No to continuing. A few years ago, I accompanied a group of ministers to Greece, retracing Paul's ministry there. On our way toward Corinth we stopped at Delphi, site of the temple to Apollo. Here pilgrims once came from far and near, not only to worship but to get from the priestess some assurance about the future. Kings and queens opened their purses for such words, as did soldiers, merchants, wives, and mothers-to-be. Will my baby be healthy? Will my ships return safely? Will I win the battle? Who would not pay for certainty? As we left the shrine, one minister lingered, apparently in deep thought. "It's time to go," I said. "I know, but I was thinking that if I lived here when this temple was active, I probably would have come." "With a question?" "Yes, I would pay for an answer to the question still haunting me: Am I supposed to be a minister? Have I really been called?"

It strikes me that maybe we ask too much when we ask for certainty. Like trying to find proof for faith or for love. Is not risk an ingredient of faith and of ministry as well? Sure, certainty sound appealing; a sign would be nice, we think, but would not the sign itself be open to question? Suppose one were to be a faithful minister without ever being able to point to a sign, a proof of call: does that render null and void all the prayers, the sermons, the counseling, the administrative leadership, the community service? Not one bit. The heart of all ministry lies in the heart of God, not in the confidence of the minister, in trust in God, not in the proof of a sign which may or may not have been given. One's relation to God, sustained by constant prayer, should be sign enough.

But if the appetite for a sign still persists, let me offer one. In Romans 8:18-27, Paul speaks of "the groan". Ever since sin entered the world, there has been a groan in the natural world, filled as it is with decay, conflict, violence, and death, victim as it is of human neglect and violation. There is, Paul says, a groan in human life in which a growing and brightening spirit is housed in a failing and dying body. The incongruity is painful and will be until we finally experience the full salvation of God. And finally, says Paul, there is a groan in the faith life of the believer. We do not know how to pray as we ought. We do not know what is best, what God wills. Even when we pray, we are so filled with what want we do not know what we need. We are as children so accustomed to eating cake we have lost the appetite for bread. But the Holy Spirit, which knows the mind of God, intercedes for us with groans too deep for words. The groan signals the distance between nature and God, between human and God, even between those who pray and God. The groan expresses the pain of God until all life is reconciled and at peace with God.

If you can hear the groan of God, then on you lies the burden to help reconcile the world to God. You have been called to ministry.