

Third Sunday in Easter
May 1, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Act 9:1-20

God calls us to serve. As clergy, we are called to this ministry. Churches don't hire a pastor, they call a pastor. Ministry is not a profession. It is a calling.

My call came in stages. It took about six or seven years and an accumulation of signs rather than any single dramatic vision or event. The first sign was one of the older parishioners who urged me to go into ministry. He requested Bangor Theological Seminary to send me admission material. When I was moderator a couple of years later, our pastor and our organist resigned, their last day was the same Sunday. The church administrative assistant and the sexton resigned around the same time. I ran the church for about two weeks without any staff before our interim arrived. Several people in the congregation later suggested that I go into ministry. During the party at the end of our interim time, one of the Berkshire clergy, who was familiar with the congregation, came to me and said, "You got the bug. You're going to be a preacher." I politely said, "No way." Meanwhile, I was increasingly becoming more involved in our local church.

My call came when I was the technology administrator for the Central Berkshire Regional School District. The job was too stressful for several reasons, and I got no satisfaction from it. I reflected upon all the people who urged me to enter ministry. I reflected upon this parallel life of an unsatisfying technology job and a highly satisfying life as a church volunteer. After some prayer, I applied to Union Theological Seminary and was accepted. I haven't looked back.

I taught field education at Union for a couple of years. Field ed is a two-semester course for students pursuing a Masters of Divinity. Most of them become ordained clergy.

One of my former students, Tallu Schuyler Quinn, had her memoir published on April 18, entitled **What We Wish Were True**. Tallu was always a joyful presence in the class, who lit up any room she entered. She was an excellent writer.

Tallu, graduated with an MDiv. She loved preparing food. She described a lunch during her last semester she had with her professor, Janet. Tallu wrote, “She said to me, ‘So what are you going to do?’... I understood her question to be an inquiry into my plans for the immediate future. ‘Well, I’m doing some private chef work for a couple of families here in New York, which is pretty lucrative, so I’ll probably stay in the city and continue.’ And before I could finish, she squarely put her hand on the table between our salads and said, ‘No, Tallu, what are you going to do about poverty?’”¹

Following graduation, Tallu kicked around a bit, including some months in Nicaragua. While there, she got a call from a childhood friend who was the pastor in her home church in Nashville. He asked her if she would be the part-time manager of a non-profit food program called Mobile Loaves and Fishes, which provided sack lunches distributed from food trucks in poor sections of Nashville. On the flight home she began to sketch out a comprehensive program that would be more than the sack lunch band aid. She envisioned a food-centered ministry incorporating employment and educational opportunities, communal kitchens, and food gardens. Her mother told her that it would take ten years to fulfill her vision. What began as a part-time job making sack lunches became the Nashville Food Project.

Its mission is “Bringing people together to grow, cook and share nourishing food, with the goals of cultivating community and alleviating hunger in our city.”² Her seminary education

¹ Tallu Schuyler Quinn. *What We Wish Were True Reflections on Nurturing Life and Facing Death*. Convergent: New York 2022 Page 40

² <https://www.thenashvillefoodproject.org/>

and experience in Nicaragua opened to her the way food can build community. Margaret Renkl of **The New York Times** wrote about the Nashville Food Project. It provides meals in collaboration with other anti-poverty programs in the city, gardens so people can grow their own food including refugees who wanted their own native food, and a food recovery program from restaurants, grocery stores, and conference centers, which went into providing meals for the people they served and also kept the food out of landfills.³

This was Tallu's ministry. She wasn't ordained by the church. She wrote about dish towels being a type stole clergy wear as a sign of our calling, "Cooking meals and sharing food isn't something I do, it's at the core of who I am. Through this basic and uncomplicated work, I feel I have been pulled into the calling that is my deepest desire: God ordained and community affirmed. It's not a traditional calling, but it is an authentic one. Wiping, drying, wrapping, mopping – we toil with cloth in hand to tend and engage each other, ordained by something else."⁴

Ten years after she began, she received the first Woman of Purpose award from Les Dames d'Escoffier International, an organization to advance and support women in the food, beverage, and hospitality industry who achieve excellence in leadership and philanthropy.⁵

John Newton was another call story. He was a slave trader. His mother taught him Christianity, but she died when he was seven. By 11 he was accompanying his father on sea voyages. At 18 he was in the Royal Navy and deserted. He was relieved of his duties and placed on a passing slave ship. He liked the slave trade. Though his early Christian teachings remained

³ Margaret Renkl. Feeding the Hungry, One Wholesome Meal at a Time. The New York Times. June 14, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/14/opinion/nashville-food-project.html?searchResultPosition=3>

⁴ Tallu Schuyler Quinn. What We Wish Were True Reflections on Nurturing Life and Facing Death. Convergent: New York 2022 Page 13

⁵ <https://ldei.org/awards/woman-of-purpose/>

with him, they played no role in his life until March 10, 1748, when he steered his near-foundering ship through a fierce storm. Despite his conversion he did not see the contradiction between his faith and slave trading. He continued until 1754 when ill-health forced him to stop. He gravitated to the Church of England and in 1764 became a clergyman in Olney, Buckinghamshire. to a largely poor congregation. One of his parishioners was William Cowper and together they wrote hymns. Newton wrote 280 hymns, the most famous is probably *Amazing Grace*.

In 1780 Newton left Olney to serve a church in London. As his faith matured, he became attentive to slavery's injustice. In 1785 met the abolitionist William Wilberforce and became his spiritual mentor. Newton grew to become a fierce abolitionist, and in 1788 published a graphic description of the slave trade along with his confession about his participation. He would go on to testify against slavery before Parliament. He died nine months after slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire.⁶

God's call doesn't have to be as dramatic as Saul's or Ananias'. More often it is not a heavenly light and a voice coming from above or even a vision in a dream. Rather, the call more likely is a stirring in our hearts – connecting to our passion, the core of our being. The call may come from what we see when we really look at the world around us, which prompts us to say, “This is wrong and cannot stand. Something must be done.” The call may come from a friend saying, “What are you going to do about poverty?” or people urging you to a new endeavor, even when you don't see it yourself.

God's call never ceases. God's call is not reserved for people with MDiv degrees. God's call is not only for clergy or for people who seek to be clergy. God's call is to ministry, whether

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Newton>

ordained by the church or ordained by the community. God's call doesn't end when we find our ministry, either. God's call beckons us on a lifelong journey of faith to find not just our salvation, but to bring salvation and hope to our community, locally and globally. We hear God's call when we are alive to the Holy Spirit.

When we follow God's call, our lives are transformed because we have found our life's calling. Furthermore, our call is not only about serving a church or running a food-centered community organization. We're called when our work is our passion. Our call, then, is not just religious. Our call can be teaching children or adults. Our call can be helping people prepare financially for their retirement. Our call can be protecting the public or maintaining our open spaces for public use. When we are called, we connect our innermost passion to our outermost expression of our lives. When we fulfill our calling, we can't imagine doing anything else. It is authentic. It is ordained by God and community affirmed. Our calling is our ministry.