

"The Calling Begins ..."

A sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison
and Community Member Stephan Papayanis (1/14/18)

Last week I shared about my baptism and a brief synopsis regarding my childhood journey into faith. Today I have the pleasure of incorporating some of my own ruminations and discussion-points in concert with insights by my dear friend and Church of the Covenant community member Stephan Papayanis. Stephan and I sat down together this past week at the quaint café Magnolia Foods just down the street, on Rivermont Ave, and had a wonderful conversation where I found myself simply smitten with Stephan's wisdom and unique thoughts on life, this one and the next. I was struck by the ebb and flow of the conversation topics as well, as we meandered from spiritual journey to philosophy and social critique, especially in light of tomorrow's significance, where we celebrate and honor the life and struggle of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., this sacred day when we take time to engage ourselves with introspection and solemn reflection, searching out our deepest fears and longing to make them our greatest strengths, where we dream desperately to see a world standing upon the values which our Judeo-Christian roots demand: "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God", we in essence respond to God's call for us to do exactly that. And as a result, we become better. We stand taller, we walk straighter, and we are filled with joy—for we become part of this world's existential journey to find true meaningfulness, true purpose, true harmony.

I will present excerpts of Stephan's and my conversation, using them as vignettes of illumination and segues into larger philosophical questions, but all centering on the main theme of "The Calling Begins ...". This is the start of that conversation:

"From the time I was nine years old, I was reading a lot about philosophy, oriental mysticism and I've always had a sort of 'quixotic' worldview. Always believed in the impossible, man of La Mancha, to dream the impossible dream... a star-struck idealist believing that anything is possible with the proper spirit."

I was immediately impacted by Stephan's words. His reference to Don Quixote had been one of my favorite stories since adolescence, the surreal tale of a middle aged man impaled with periods of psychosis, and clearly seeing the world differently than everyone else; this took me back to a more simple time in my own life when I dared to dream big, regardless of what others thought of me. To Don Quixote, his ugly barn-horse is a valiant steed and the village windmills, ferocious giants. As Stephan so eloquently put it, even as a child, much like the "man of La Mancha", he too was "...a star struck idealist believing that anything is possible", and so wisely adding this caveat: But with "the proper spirit." I absolutely latched on to this notion. I kept repeating those three words in my mind: The proper spirit. The proper spirit. The proper spirit. How often do we think about that question, "Am I doing this with the proper spirit?" Stephan went on to add fuel to this fire that was already raging within my mind, when he expounded on this idea more. Take a listen as he puts this idea in context with scripture:

"I'm particularly enamored [with] Corinthians, Galatians, and Ephesians. They are three of my favorites. I love it when Paul says 'let us not only live in the Spirit, let us walk in the Spirit."

This idea of "walking in the Spirit", capital "S" juxtaposed with what I had already been pondering, doing things in "the proper spirit", lower case "s", tested my own "spirit". I have always valued the Great Communion, a mystical place somewhere between this world and the heavens, where our spirits dance as one, in meditative communion, synchronized, harmonious, connected. I thought about these connections carefully, even while Stephan continued to talk (thank God I recorded it all for later reflection). But Stephan had spurred something in me. I didn't want to interrupt his thoughts, so I would have to wait till later to finish my internal debate: Do I live in the Spirit (capital "S")? Do I walk in the Spirit (capital "S")? and do I do it with the "proper spirit" (lower case "s")? Then Stephan gently snapped me back into his world when he began to talk about the Church as a body:

"...and then also Paul says in Ephesians, and then we talk about the different aspects of denominations that they compare them to the different parts of the body: Why should the ear argue with the nose? Each has its separate place and function."

As you probably predicted, I instantly visualized the “ear arguing with the nose”. I was familiar with the concept, but it was something about how Stephan put it, or maybe better yet, it was the fact that Stephan took the time to point it out himself that made me pause. The Apostle Paul did talk about the parts of the body, each with a specific function, and that they shouldn’t take sides against one another, but work in harmony as one body. It was just what I needed to hear, but I have a feeling Stephan knew that. I had just read these very words earlier that day from our standard membership book “The Journey of a Lifetime”:

“Psalm 34 says: ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good.’ A more literal translation would be: ‘Find out for yourself that God is good.’ Ultimate responsibility is finding out for ourselves what the life of faith is about, discovering in the uniqueness of our own lives who God is, who we are in God, and what we are called to be and do with these lives of ours. If we come into the community of faith expecting others to give us the answers or to tell us what to do, we are doomed to frustration, disappointment, and confusion. We are expecting others to give us what we need to discover for ourselves. The great adventure and challenge of the life of faith is the journey we take of discovering in our own lives what it means to follow Jesus.”

Now Stephan, perhaps unaware of my mental digressions, was helping me make these connections, adding illumination to what I felt God had already been showing me about the process of “being called” and how the “calling” from God for each of us is born out of our own individual journeys with God and perhaps even with each other (remember some of us may be a “nose” and others “the ear”, but all the same body). In many ways we are in this together. I was amazed at how at such a young age, much like myself, Stephan was spurred onto a spiritual path. Listen, as he shares more about it:

“...but like I was saying, when I was nine years old, I took a great interest in philosophy, and I was reading about yoga and things of the mind. I was very interested in spiritual development and my spiritual journey started at nine years old. I saw the misery of life. I saw how people got sick and died, and illness. And I was taught about Siddhartha. My father and

mother taught me about the Buddha, how Siddhartha, the wealthy prince, had lived a sheltered life. And one day he looked over the balcony and saw from a distance a glimpse of the 'real' world, the poor suffering down below. Then he had to go."

Suddenly, Stephan inadvertently gave me permission to accept my own suffering as an informing part of my makeup. Have you ever thought about that, how moments of suffering from your personal experience shape you into who you are today? How personal misery or hardship contributes to your present makeup? Stephan said, "I saw the misery of life. I saw about how people got sick and died." Thus his spiritual genesis was founded on the most difficult of things in his young life. He so eloquently parallels his own journey with that of our own without perhaps even intending to. Thank you, Stephan, for helping us accept this reality in our own lives. We are suffering as well as we are joy. We are both.

I suddenly remembered, as Stephan continued to speak, his mentioning of Jesus as the "suffering servant" in an earlier part of the conversation (though I didn't play the clip). This aligned nicely, almost as a natural segue, now into Siddhartha's own story as a youth living in luxury and seeing the suffering of the poor, which eventually led to his lifelong spiritual journey for true fulfillment, not superficial indulgences, and so the Buddha's quest began—on a road spurred by suffering but ending in enlightenment. It still astonished me that Stephan had been grappling with these deep philosophical questions when he was only nine years old. And now here I was sorting it out at a much older age; perhaps though, thanks to Stephan's natural encouragement, I was presently approaching this puzzle with a nine year old's freshness and optimism. So, let me attempt to synthesize scriptural notions of call with Stephan's ideas of journey and my own take on both. Brace yourselves: The Calling Begins...

Over twenty years ago Ruth and I participated in a personal Bible Study series called "Experiencing God". The study thematically revolved around a simple premise: God is working all around us, join God in that work (based on John 5:17,19-20). There was nothing more thrilling at the time than Ruth and I discussing about "the possibilities". God seemed to be everywhere, and God seemed to be at work in nearly everything, as well as in us. I asked

my grandfather, the Baptist minister, around the same time, "How do you know what God's will is for your life?" And he, without a pause, without skipping a beat (as if he'd given this answer a thousand times before), responded, "God's will, will give you peace. Even when it may be uncomfortable, you will have deep internal peace about it." Talk about feeling "uncomfortable", look at Samuel. As a child, hearing God's voice call his name. "Samuel. Samuel. Samuel" and then giving him a message to be delivered to his teacher, his mentor, his caregiver, Eli. Certainly Samuel was more than "uncomfortable". The news was negative, more like painful. It certainly pained Samuel to follow through with delivering the message to his mentor and friend; he was afraid. But he did it because, most certainly, he had a deep "peace" about it, and he wouldn't be at peace unless he completed the task God had given him. How many of us find ourselves wrestling with similar ideas of fulfilling something we know God has given us to do? We, too, crave peace. The Calling Begins.

When Jesus uttered the two words to Philip, "follow me", it seems very one-directional. And some of us find deep comfort in this kind of "call" or "invitation" because it requires little of us, except to simply step forward. However, the Greek word used is *akoloutheo*, which is often translated as "follow" but can also have the additional meaning of "accompany" or my favorite "assist". In fact, the word "akolyte" comes from the same word; *akolytes* are often the young children in particularly larger churches that assist with the lighting of the candles. They are *helpers*. We may never know what Aramaic word Jesus actually used that day, but judging by the actions of Philip later, I wouldn't at all be surprised if Jesus had asked Philip to simply "come and help" him, to truly be a part of bringing God's kingdom to everyone on this earth. We certainly have some evidence of this. Philip immediately helped by recruiting Nathanael. Later in the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, Philip was asked by Jesus, "Where can we get enough to feed all these people?" And Philip, trying to be helpful—using his computational acumen, responded that eight month's wages would not be enough to buy each person one bite. However, Jesus showed Philip how God can *help* as well, and all were adequately fed. Philip was later martyred in Phrygia for continuing to *help* share the good news that Jesus had brought to the earth. Helping God can in the end can seemingly cost you everything, but at the same time *give* you everything. The Calling Begins.

Case in point, when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., having wrestled internally against the notions of racial injustice and racial segregation since he was a six-year-old, and now as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in the mid 1950's, felt God's calling to finally stand up and "do" something after Rosa Parks had been arrested for sitting in a seat at the front of a public bus. The Calling Begins. King's leadership in the bus boycott and the subsequent Supreme Court ruling that segregation on public buses was unconstitutional became a spring-board to fight racial injustice within the institutions themselves with nonviolent protests for the next two decades, however, ending in his untimely death in 1968. Sometimes helping God can seemingly cost you everything, but at the same time give you everything. While it cost Dr. King his life, the conversation for racial equity and social justice in this country has become a living and ever-evolving reality. But like Samuel and Philip, we too must answer God's call. God needs our help.

Finally, I leave you with this. Don't stop dreaming. Dr. King didn't. Imagine a better world, a world riddled with hope rather than despair. Like Don Quixote, don't be afraid to look foolish for the sake of seeing hope when no one else sees a problem in the first place. And as Stephan taught us, do it with the "proper spirit". How can you walk with God's spirit, if you don't first have the "proper spirit" yourself. Take time to close your eyes, quiet your mind, temper your breathing, be still, and listen. Listen to *your* spirit. Is it aligning with God's? Does it have pure, loving intentions? Is it prepared for *anything*? Only then can your spirit truly walk with God's Spirit. So, take the time to self-assess, and then respond to the call. Walking in the Spirit, God's Spirit, will require movement on our part. And the calling begins with you, with me. We must listen. We must observe. We must act. God wants us to be a part of something much greater than ourselves. Let us join Stephan in his "Quixotic" worldview, and "be a man of *La Mancha*, and dream the impossible dream". And let us do it together!