

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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## Letting our lives speak

To Quaker author Parker J. Palmer, following God's call means letting your life say what God wants it to say. Palmer finds that we don't always let that happen. "It is indeed possible," he assures us in *Let Your Life Speak* (Jossey-Bass, 2000), "to live a life other than one's own." The challenge each of us faces, he finds, is how to find and live the life that is really ours.

Do not neglect the gift that is in you.  
—1 Timothy 4:14

Palmer tells how his understanding of the Quaker saying "Let your life speak" has changed over the course of his life. He first thought the saying meant trying to imitate Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, or some other hero of his youth. "I lined up the loftiest ideals I could find," Palmer explains, "and set out to achieve them." That didn't work. "The results were rarely admirable, often laughable, and sometimes grotesque," he says. "But always they were unreal, a distortion of my true self . . ."



## Listening comes first

Palmer finally saw the need to listen to his heart rather than trying to conform to a list of values that weren't his. "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it," he urges us, "listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent."



Palmer finds that following God's call comes not from willfulness but from listening, and that we often listen in the wrong places. "We are taught to listen to everything and everyone but ourselves, to take all our clues about living from the people and powers around us. . . . We listen for guidance everywhere except from within." Yet God's call, Palmer reminds us, "does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear."

## Who's called?

M. Scott Peck says that each of his books has taken about two years to write, and that without feeling driven he wouldn't have been patient enough to spend that much time on a project (*In Search of Stones*, Pocket Books, 1995). "The religious word for such drivenness is 'calling,'" he says. "In each case, I've been able to keep my nose to the grindstone only because I felt 'called' to write that particular work."



Is drivenness the same as a calling? Not necessarily, at least not in the sense of being an instruction from God. Being called by God may make the called person feel driven, but people also feel driven to do things that are the opposite of what God wants.



## Calling isn't just to church jobs

Within the church our assumptions about calling are sometimes misleading. We often assume it means only a calling to the ordained ministry—to paid, full-time service done through a church institution. This misunderstanding can keep Christians from seeing that God calls each Christian to a ministry and gives each one the abilities needed for doing it. Christians are called to nursing, teaching, writing, business, homemaking, politics, science, and countless other occupations.



## Church jobs don't all need clergy

We also make another wrong assumption about being called. We assume that all clergy are called to every aspect of running the church. We expect them to preach, counsel, know about the Bible and theology, and manage church organization and finances, yet one person rarely has the skills needed for all those jobs. Lay people often have more of the skills and training that church business and administrative jobs need, and some lay people can speak, teach, or counsel as well as or better than some clergy.

By expecting clergy to do all the jobs, we make unreasonable demands on clergy. By reserving all the church jobs for clergy, we keep some of the jobs from being done by the people who could do them best. We keep both lay and ordained Christians from using their God-given gifts and answering God's call.

## Listening isn't being selfish

In urging us to listen for a voice from within, Palmer is advising us to notice what works and what doesn't work in our ways of living our lives. We are drawn toward certain experiences and repelled by others, he reminds us, and much of the guidance we need can come from paying attention to how different kinds of experiences affect us.



Unfortunately we're often taught to distrust this kind of observation. We're brainwashed with what Palmer calls "the belief that the sinful self will always be 'selfish' unless corrected by external forces of virtue." Our true calling, however, comes from what he describes as "a voice 'in here' calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfill the original selfhood given me at birth by God."



## Not a once-and-for-all choice

We may assume that following our calling means making a once-and-for-all decision early in life, but fortunately this view isn't as common as it used to be. Many people now make fresh starts at midlife or even in old age, embarking on second careers or even third or fourth careers, and that is often what God calls us to do.



Sometimes a change comes because we've become newly aware of the need to listen for God's call and follow it rather than merely doing what other people expect or want. Maybe we heard God's call earlier and followed it, but God is calling us to something different now. We may have acquired new skills over the years, making us able to do something now that we couldn't have done earlier. Maybe we've now had experiences that have given us valuable insight that we didn't have previously. God's call doesn't just come once in a lifetime. It keeps coming.

## Saying "no" can be okay

Knowing what we're not called to do is often harder than knowing what we're called to do. In the church we often try to make members feel guilty if they don't do whatever job currently needs doing. When we need Sunday School teachers or fund raisers or



ushers, we draft whatever willing and available bodies we can find. We don't worry about whether the draftees have the calling or gifts for the job.

Maybe that's okay. When church jobs and other ministries need doing and we're part of the church, maybe we should always help. Duty may have higher priority than calling. I'm not sure. I'm not sure if taking food to the people I know who are sick or bereaved is my permanent Christian duty. I wonder if I'm shirking my duty by no longer helping with Vacation Bible School. Earlier in my life I did these things regularly, because I thought every female church member was supposed to do them. I wasn't aware of being personally called to anything. I thought a calling was only the calling to be a missionary or pastor of a church, and I knew those jobs weren't for me.



Now I feel fairly sure that hospital visiting, teaching children, and food preparation aren't my calling either. I feel the same way about hands-on ministries with groups like the poor and prisoners. I'm not very good at such things, and I think I'm called instead to ministries of other kinds. I still have the nagging fear that I might be wrong, however—that I might be just rationalizing to avoid what I'd rather not do—so I still feel a little guilty when I see the need for those other ministries but don't do them.



## No one is called to do everything

Palmer calls this tendency to feel we must do everything or it won't get done "functional atheism." It's believing that God can't get anything done through other people. "The gift we receive on the inner journey," Palmer reminds us, "is the knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. Not only are there other acts out there, but some of them are even better than ours, at least occasionally!"



Sometimes we're called only to pave the way or to give moral or financial support to the person who is called to do the job, and doing that is important. As Abraham Lincoln once said about a task for which he needed his generals' support, "Even if you can't skin a deer, at least you can hold a leg."

## How can we tell?

### ■ Church confirmation



In the Bible, the church's confirmation is often the test of a Christian's calling. Today, many churches give that confirmation through certification processes or election to church offices. Becoming ordained, for example, may require being officially certified as having been called by God and having not only the right gifts and skills but also extensive training. Churches also have official training and certification procedures for lay ministries like counseling, teaching, and visiting the sick.

"The church," however, doesn't have to mean an institution like the United Methodist Church. It may simply mean our fellow Christians. We know we're called when they say we do something especially well. Confirmation may even come from "the world," if like most lay Christians we're called to do our ministry there.



What if we find ourselves called to a ministry that requires a church's official permission but we can't get it? Should we go ahead on our own? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Should we drop out and start our own group or join a different one? Maybe, but maybe not. Should we assume that the church's rejection means God isn't really calling us? Rejection means that sometimes, but not always.

Parker Palmer reminds us that times of traveling in the dark and taking wrong turns usually are part of finding God's call. Often we have to try some things that don't work. Rejection—even getting fired—can be part of God's way of leading us to our true vocation. It can show us limits that we need to recognize.



Rejection, however, can be something very different. "Sometimes," Palmer assures us, "it is the work of a pathological boss or a corporate culture, getting rid of people whose propensity for truth-telling threatens the status quo." So the right response to one experience of rejection isn't the right response to every such experience, and the right response for one person isn't necessarily right for another.

### ■ Joy instead of drudgery



Although I doubt that it's a foolproof test of a calling, I find that a feeling of rightness and satisfaction comes from doing what you're called to do, and that a feeling of grim drudgery comes from making yourself do what you're not called to do. There's a sense in which doing what you're called to do is easy and enjoyable even though in another sense it may be very hard work and have aspects that are far from enjoyable. Following one's calling brings the feeling, Parker Palmer observes, that "This is something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself."

People often comment to me on what a chore writing and mailing *Connections* must be. "I couldn't begin to do that," they say, "and I can't imagine doing all the research that you do." To me, however, writing is easier and more enjoyable than most of the ways I see other people spending their time, and I don't think of my reading as research. It's simply reading about things I'm interested in and want to know about. The person who couldn't bear to do *Connections* may spend hours happily visiting with shut-ins, which for me is a chore and one I feel totally inept at doing. Given the choice between visiting shut-ins and writing *Connections*, I'd definitely choose *Connections*.



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

■ Seeing what works and what doesn't

Each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.  
—1 Corinthians 7:7

Noticing that doing certain kinds of jobs brings good results can help us see what our calling is. So can questionnaires that identify personality types, aptitudes, and spiritual gifts.

■ Growing instead of stagnating

Following your calling keeps you growing in a way that doing other things doesn't. Gail Godwin emphasizes that through a character in her novel *Evensong* (Ballentine, 1999). Using "vocation" to

mean "calling" instead of merely what you do to earn your living, he says, "Something's your vocation if it keeps making more of you."



What is your life saying?

Your life is speaking constantly, not only to you but also to others. What is it saying? What is God saying to you? What is God saying through you to the church and the world?

*Barbara*



Connections

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Letting our lives speak

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We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us . . .  
—Romans 12:6

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters . . .  
-- 1 Corinthians 1:26



Serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.  
—1 Peter 4:10

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

—1 Corinthians 12:4-7