

John 4:5-42 (The Woman at the Well)

Before going into the ministry,

I taught Eng./college level for 10 yrs. as I worked my way through various degrees.
I loved teaching & couldn't believe I was getting paid for something so easy for me.

I saw a very peaceful, pleasant life spread out before me...

of comfortable bachelorhood, cool literature,

calm evenings of sports in the gym and on TV,

and falling asleep in a chair w/ a good book on my lap.

I don't know what heaven looks like to you,

but in my 30's I thought I was well on my way.

Teaching was not just a job; it was a living out of who I am.

My father never worked as a doctor: he is a doctor, even in retirement.

In the same way, I am a teacher, regardless of what I am doing.

I knew God had given me the spiritual gift/teaching...

and thus knew I was doing exactly what I was supposed to do for rest/my life.

My career path and my dreams were one, so planning the future was easy.

You wanna' know how to make God laugh? Tell him your plans!

In the course/my working on my doctoral dissertation,

my cousin Dave, who was like an older brother to me, died in car accident,

my fiancée went to Germany on Fulbright, met someone/never came back,

my book bag with 2 yrs. of notes stolen from under table in restaurant/NY,

my cat was hit and killed by a car right out in front of my house!

As I sat w/ my pastor, Ray Gott. trying to figure out what was going on, he said that...

since he and I had been talking about seminary for as long as he'd known me,

maybe it was time for me to visit Trinity Lutheran Seminary/Columbus.

I said, "Ok, Ray, but the 1st time I hear someone singing 'Kumba Ya, My Lord,'

I'm coming back!" You know what I'm talking about...[sing]

It wasn't that I disliked the song: I just hated sentimental Xianity.

It was too easy: *Someone's crying, Lord. Come by here.*

Well, I'd done a lot of crying, hadn't felt Jesus come by me...not once.

When I visited Trinity, I met a lot of tough people who, like me, had done...

their share of wrestling with God. No one sang "Kumba Ya," so I enrolled.

When I started sem., I found I had a much bigger problem on my hands than sentimentality.

Everything had been so comfortable in education:

ed. classes back then only required common sense (no standardized testing!),

teaching was as natural as breathing for me,

and the lifestyle of a college English professor matched my need for privacy,

and time to study and write.

Seminary wasn't so comfortable: like everyone, I had to struggle w/ my sense of call...

(at the end of the psychological evaluation every seminarian has to take,

I was told that I was much too creative and spontaneous to be a parish pastor...

and that I'd make a much better televangelist or megachurch leader!).

Discerning my call was especially difficult for me because,
unlike most/my classmates, I was the only pastor anywhere in my family tree.
Classes were very similar to those I'd taken on the graduate level in English,
but I had to wonder whether the lifestyle of a pastor...
suited someone who needed significant time alone every day.

I figured that all of this would be resolved during my first year of seminary,
when students serve under experienced pastors in local churches.

B/c of my background, however, the sem. decided to place me at OSU campus min.

Whew, I was back in my comfort zone, among college students/faculty members
And, I was teaching at Capital University to pay for seminary bills,
so, really, things hadn't changed that much.

When I graduated, I was placed in a parish near Muskegon, MI, whose founding pastor...
had just died on a Sunday morning after being their only pastor for 25 years.

I ended up serving as a kind of unintentional interim pastor for 3 years,
helping them to deal w/ their loss and move on.

And then I moved on... to Kal. to become a campus pastor who also taught English!

And, once again, I was safe/comfortable, nestled snugly in the arms/academia.

I could have stayed forever, I suppose, but after 7 years,

I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I'd done this all before.

I fell into familiar routines w/ my students that were comfortable and successful,
but really I'd stopped growing as a mentor during my first 10 years of teaching,
and now I was in my 20th year of guiding undergraduates.

What I've always described as a tingling of the call had been going on for 3-4 years...
before I finally decided to return to parish ministry.

Once again, I was being called out of my comfort zone, and...

after putting God on call-waiting for as long as I could, I finally answered!

Before I accepted the call here, though, I was given one more chance at comfort.

I was asked to interview...

at a church that was being called the Lutheran answer to the megachurch.

It was young, dynamic, contemporary, "on the edge";

"Hey, maybe I'd end up on television, after all!"

They loved that I'd been working w/ young people, that I was enthusiastic & spirit-led,
that I played the guitar.

It looked like a good fit: something that I would be comfortable with.

But, you know what, this church lacked one thing for me:

it wasn't where I was being called.

After being here for 3 months, I have no doubt that I am exactly where I am supposed to be.

Had I gone into the ministry directly after graduating from Ohio State in 1975,
and spent those 33 yrs in ministry, this is exactly where I would want to be now.

Isn't that a miracle?

Pastor Ray Gottschling used the story of Jonah for my ordination sermon:

God wanted me to take the risky path to a new place,

but I kept wanting to go to the much safer & more recognizable destination.
I kept taking the road more traveled, but life kept throwing me overboard...
and throwing me up on the unfamiliar shores of Nineveh.

And God has used all of the strange twists my career has taken:

my experience in secondary education has served me well in teaching Catechism,
my years as a bookstore manager taught me how to manage an organization,
my work with young people spread out over a period of almost 30 years...

has given me a good sense of generational shifts and movements,
and my work with over 20 churches as a campus pastor has broadened my perspective.

But none of this would have mattered if I had stayed where I was: safe/comfortable.

I am living out God's dream for me, which is better than any I would have concocted.

So, that is my story...now I want to know yours.

There is an old saying among New England farmers...

"Be careful what rut you fall into: this one goes on for 30 miles!"

God has a dream for you, a new dream:

a dream that will make use of every gift God has given you.

But new dreams are scary: it's so much easier to stay in one's comfort zone.

Let's be honest here:

do you feel a "tingling of the call," a slight dissatisfaction w/ what you're doing?

There is no age restriction on calls:

God has something in mind for you at every stage of your life.

So, what if you do feel something is missing? How can you get out of your rut?

Pr. Tim Sledge: there are 3 important principles for moving out/comfort zones of our lives.

First, to move out of comfort zones, we have to face our fears.

The woman/well in today's Gospel had to overcome her fear of strangers,

her fear of men and the power they held over women in those days, and...

her fear of Jews & their attitudes toward Samaritans in order to meet Jesus.

The Jewish people were afraid in the wilderness: they were afraid they would starve,

die of thirst, be slaughtered by enemies, get lost, and on and on...

even though God had always provided for them.

When you think about moving out of your comfort zone, what are you afraid of?

You have to face these fears honestly...

and you need to get to the source of your fears.

Often there are underlying fears that you are avoiding.

As Pr. Sledge points out,

the greatest fear we all face in moving out of our comfort zones is our fear of failure.

I had to overcome this fear in order to move into a career that wasn't as easy for me.

I used to tell my students that if they couldn't name at least a half a dozen...

glorious failures in their lives, they weren't trying anything hard enough.

How do we know what our limits are until we've pushed ourselves beyond them?

Most of us never know what we're capable of...

b/c we are too afraid to try things at which we might fail.

Yet every biography of truly successful people I've ever read is full of failures.

Both the people of Israel and the woman at the well overcame their fears...

by focusing on Jesus, Pastor Sledge's 3rd principle.

If you have a hard time moving on to new adventures, new dreams,
it's b/c you've been trying to go it alone.

We simply are not capable of reinventing ourselves w/o help.

Too much of our identity gets tied up in what we do...

for us to just drop what we've been doing and move on to something new.

Your true identity is simply this: you are a beloved child of God.

Every other way you define yourself: mother/father/sister/brother/friend/enemy/
manager/laborer/salesperson/ housewife/retiree/student/American/

Elk/Moose/Veteran/man/woman/white/black/gay/straight/

young/old/Republican/Democrat) is artificial & temporary.

Once you realize that your identity rests only with God,

it becomes easier to let go of old definitions of who you are...

and become whomever God wants you to be.

I am a pastor only b/c God wishes it so; the woman at the well is the 1st evangelist,

even though she would have been thought to be of the wrong race, sex, and faith;

by the grace of God, the people of Israel escape their old identities as slaves...

and enter into the promised land as God's chosen people.

What beautiful, unexpected dream awaits you if you can only...

step out of your places of comfort, keeping your focus solely on the Lord?

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