

## Pentecost

### My Call

Frankton –5/24/15

Scripture: Isaiah 55.4 He will be a leader

Proposition: God allows us to argue yet shows his love to us anyway.

The Bishop and cabinet has asked every pastor in Indiana to relate their call to ministry story on this day of Pentecost. So here's mine. I was born and raised in Anderson; graduated from MHHS (Go Pirates!). In 1979, I graduated with a Chemical Engineering Degree from Purdue University and started working as an engineer for what was then called Guide Division of General Motors. A couple of years later, I married my wife Jan, another long-time Andersonian, and in the next few years, we had our two children, Angela and Andy. So by 1986, we were a family of four. We had a house in the 'burbs (well, the bank and us had a house in the 'burbs); we had a dog. We had two cars. Jan was working at Community Hospital in Anderson. We were attending my home church, New Horizons UMC in Anderson. We had the typical American dream. And that went on for several years. I was just fat, dumb and happy; going along my merry way.

And then it happened. I started having these 'feelings.' And speaking to the guys for just a minute, all of you know how we like to have feelings. We don't like having feelings. We would rather have thoughts. We're men, we don't have any feelings; we have thoughts. We're men, we want to think our way through things rather than feel our way through things. We would rather use logic than intuition. We men want to be like Mr. Spock on the old TV series, Star Trek. He's a Vulcan and Vulcans don't have any feelings and we men don't want any either. Unfortunately, I was having these 'feelings.' I thought that maybe these feelings were thoughts. I hoped they were. But they weren't very logical, so they had to be feelings. I was feeling like I needed to do something different with my life. (Some might call it a mid-life crisis, but there wasn't any red corvette or well-endowed blonde involved.) These feelings were telling me that I needed to quit being an engineer and become a minister.

My job at Guide had become less fulfilling to me. I had even changed jobs (Still within Guide) to try and alleviate the feeling of not being fulfilled with what I was doing. So, now I was caught in a conundrum. On the one hand, I felt like God was calling me toward him, to be a pastor. On the other hand, my job was less and less fulfilling. So, thinking like an engineer, the question I struggled with was this: If I choose to stop being an engineer and become a pastor, am I running away from my job or running to God. There's a big difference. Was I running away from what I was doing which was less fulfilling? Or, was I running to God answering his call. I struggled with that mightily for a couple of years.

I'm not the smartest duck in the pond. So I relied on my natural instincts to react to all this 'being called by God' stuff. And being an engineer, my natural reaction was to do what engineers do best. So I did – I argued. I argued with God. Have any of you ever argued with God? I trotted out what I thought were very logical arguments to use against God and this being 'called to be a minister' thing. I told God that I was 35 years old and had a good paying job that was relatively secure, not greatly but relatively. My wife had a good job, which seemed secure. We had two

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kids who did well in their school, a dog, and a house in the suburbs. I had the great American dream. I didn't have time or desire to become a minister. And all that was very true.

But I went farther than that too. I put my logical, analytical mind to work and realized that all those things really weren't about me – they were about my situation. The real argument should be about me. I argued that I just wasn't capable of being a minister. I had been around church a lot. I had been actively involved with church and had worked closely with ministers at New Horizons. I knew what ministers were like. And I wasn't like those ministers. So I also argued with God that I didn't have all the attributes that a minister is supposed to have. I thought I lacked patience with others (just ask my wife and children). I didn't know the Bible very well. I couldn't (and still can't) quote chapter and verse. I couldn't tell you what the United Methodist church believed on a lot of issues and how what I believed fit with that. I wasn't even sure what I believed on a lot of issues and I was certain that ministers had their theology all systematically worked out. (Systematically being the engineer in me again.) And more importantly, I just didn't feel religious enough to be a minister.

But I went farther than that too. In my struggle to determine whether I was running away from my job or running to God, I actually went away from God. Here's where I became like our buddy Jonah. God was calling Jonah to go east to Nineveh, so naturally, Jonah packed his bags and hitched on the first ship heading west. He went in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go. I did the same thing. I felt that God was calling me away from what I was doing, being an engineer and working at the factory, and into the ministry, where I didn't want to go. So rather than go away from my work, I dug myself deeper into my work. I changed responsibilities at Guide a couple of times trying to prove to myself that this was where I was supposed to be. I was trying my best to run away from our loving God and into the arms of my work. (No one ever said I was real smart.)

It was during this time of running from God that I realized that God utilized all the resources at his disposal. Some people would call it fighting dirty. You see, after I first felt God calling me, I kept working at the church. I wasn't saying no to the church, just no to this minister thing. So I would still teach Sunday school. I was still a lay speaker so I filled the pulpit a few times. I was still active on committees. However, each time I preached at the church or gave a Sunday School lesson, there would be those few people who would come up to me afterwards and tell me "you've missed your calling, you should have been a minister." The late Rev. Edwin Helm was good at that. Edwin was a retired minister worshipping at New Horizons and he just kept telling me that he felt that I had missed my call. And every time that happened, on the inside I was saying, "No, God and I have argued about this and the answer is no." But on the outside, I was saying to Edwin and the others, "No, I don't think so. I'm pretty happy where I'm at. I don't think God called me to be a pastor." I was lying – or maybe just trying to convince myself.

But every time that I that I heard those words, "you've missed your calling" I felt something way down inside me in a place that I didn't know existed, or I didn't want it to exist, and it was saying, "You know, they may be right." Of course it was only a feeling and I ignored it. And when I did fill the pulpit and when I did teach in Sunday school, it felt like home. I felt comfortable in those places. I felt like I might actually be making some small difference in this world – a feeling I didn't have at my job. I believe that you can tell a lot about a person by what they want written on their tombstone. Some people want "he played hard." Some want "she was a good mother."

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Some are just kind of goofy by having parking meters at their gravesite that have “expired” on them. I’ve often told people that I want my tombstone to say, “He made a difference in this world.” And when I taught or when I preached, I felt like I was making a difference.

This whole process was 4-5 years in the making. And I used to think that there was no one single significant emotional event in that 4-5 years that I could point to as a turning point in this little argument that I was having with God. But I’ve changed my mind. I remember one day in particular – actually, it was a night and it was the night that the big fish swallowed me, like the big fish swallowed Jonah. I was working second shift at Guide and I can remember being on my way home one night and I was again arguing with God. And I mean I was really arguing. I was actually yelling at God at the top of my lungs. It’s a good thing that it was at night and no one could see inside the car. They would have thought I was nuts and I probably was. I remember telling God, in no uncertain terms, that I was never going to be a minister and I was tired of him being on my case and I wanted him off my back.

There are two words in the English language that shouldn’t be used. They are ‘always’ and ‘never’. We shouldn’t use them because most assuredly when we use one of those words, we end up regretting the words that we say right after them. This is a good case in point. I told God that I was never going to become a minister. And something snapped. I realized God had been calling me and that I wasn’t running away from my job. I was indeed running to God. And it wasn’t long after that that I decided I had to become a minister. I had to do it God’s way. I realized that I was in an argument that I was never going to win, and I was wanting to win the argument less and less. So much for, “never going to become a minister.” When I decided I had to be a minister is when I got out of the fish’s mouth.

But while I had made a first step, there were many steps along the journey. I began to backslide on this becoming a minister thing. Late in the summer of 1998, I decided I would run a controlled experiment on whether God was really calling me. I decided to give God the “Gideon Bible” test. You have all heard stories of someone holed up in some hotel room thinking about ending it all and they opened up the Gideon Bible in the room and found the passage that fixed their problem. I tried that kind of test. I decided that if I would just randomly open my bible and put my finger on a passage, it would tell me if God was truly calling me. So I did. I opened this Bible, and put my finger on a passage and here’s what the passage said (about King David): [SLIDE] *See I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples.* [IS 55.4 NIV] Sounds like a pastor. Sure sounded like God calling me there. I wanted to go two out of three but was afraid what would happen.

So I tested God again. I told him that if he really wanted me to be a pastor, he would be able to get me into seminary in the fall – just a month or so away. I didn’t think he could get it done that fast. I applied to AU and was accepted quickly and started classes in September of 1998. God passed the test.

Finally, in the spring of 1999, we were living in Middletown and Andy was playing soccer in a league in New Castle. I remember coming back home from one of his practices on a Saturday and, again, I’m (silently this time) discussing things with God. I’m telling God that I quit my good paying job and now I have no income so money is going to be tight. On top of that, I have school expenses – seminary, like other colleges, is not cheap. So money is even going to get tighter. I

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told God it would really be nice if he would take care of my finances to see me through school. We were on US 36 near the little burg of Sulfur Springs when God and I were having this conversation. Twenty minutes later, I pull into our driveway and get the mail. In the mail is a letter from CTS, the seminary I was attending) that told me I was getting a full ride scholarship. God provided again.

And as they say, I have never looked back. That's not to say that every day has been rosy – there have been a few of rough days. But for the most part, it has been a wonderful ride so far. I think the point of my story is this: **[SLIDE] God** allows us to argue yet shows his love to us anyway. I spent a lot of years arguing with God over this whole ministry calling. I argued hard. Yet, through it all, God never wavered in his love for me. And he never stopped showing his love for me. And he will do the same for you. Go ahead and argue and watch God show his love for you anyway.