

Margaret Boles Fitzgerald

Last Sunday, quite by chance, two people – not related to Village Church – asked me the very same question. They wanted to know how churches survive – how Village Church specifically operates as a business...how the bottom line is managed, with the building standing tall, lights on, well-staffed and fairly compensated, providing enough “products” or programs to draw – and keep -- an audience. One is a Jewish friend whose Temple has started instituting membership fees, much as clubs charge dues, to manage its annual operating budget. The other, a millennial, was curious, thinking as a businessperson where one produces a “product” that satisfies the needs and wants of the consumer, which generates a cash transaction, which ultimately kicks off a profit.

They were surprised to learn when I told them that most churches stay in the Faith Business relying on the freewill offerings of those in the congregation. No “pay to play” -- nor drops of manna from third parties...government grants and the like.

The fact that these two inquirers asked me at the start of our Stewardship Season, and the fact that I am here at the mic on Stewardship Sunday (and I am not a member of the Stewardship Committee): This is all pure coincidence.

Jesus had a lot to say about money. I don't. At least, not in public. I don't think it's my calling.

But I did get to thinking about the concept of a calling...to what, to whom, for what reasons, who hears, who is tone-deaf, who knowingly turns away. Which then led me to reflect on my favorite Caravaggio painting, fittingly named -- The Calling of St. Matthew. It hangs in the dark recesses of a smaller church in Rome. Caravaggio captures this “moment” of an unexpected invitation, with Jesus engaged in a counterintuitive hiring practice: calling the professionally-reviled, morally-shaky Matthew to join the ranks of the motley assemblage of apostles - a dirty dozen of Most Unlikelies. Not how we build our “Best for Success” Teams these days!

Matthew, hunched over his coins as the local tax collector, looks up at Jesus with either disinterest or skepticism, as if to say, “you talking to me?” Matthew knew his place in society – marginalized, at best. We know what happens next: the ineluctable summoning of Jesus, and Matthew answers the call. In so doing, he moved from social outcast to a seat at the Rabbi's table...and an even more uncertain future.

Would that my faith journey was so sure, pure, swift, and convicted. Raised in a God-fearing and Jesus-trusting household, I was blessed on my way with all best practices in place. In time, my parents hoped that I would write my own religious narrative. Plenty of intercessory prayers went out! While in college, a surprise dip into C. S. Lewis' “Mere Christianity” brought me back to reconsider my faith – on my own terms. “Reborn-lite” one might say. Martin Luther said we must be baptized everyday ... so slippery the slope of daily living. C. S. Lewis' prose was an unexpected full immersion.

Since then -- and it's been a long time -- my relationship with God has been earnest, but erratic. Kind of like the print-out of an EKG, with a dizzying ticker-tape display of peaks and valleys. I believe I have been pretty “faithful”, but have I been faith-filled? Not the church shopping or church attending. Nor the careful and thoughtful listening, reading, singing, praying...learning. I can check those boxes! Heart AND habit. But I wanted then -- and yearn for still -- the spiritual growth ... the FAITH that settles deep in your bones...your very soul. Blessed assurance! I wanted and still want – to embrace the courage of

my convictions. I wanted my faith to define me NOT JUST by what I do, but BY WHO I AM. I wanted – still want – that peace that passes all understanding!

A few years ago, I wrestled through this Christian conundrum with my father – telling him I felt “half baked”. Isn’t that the point, he replied, to be – at the least – open to the possibilities of what COULD happen should one, indeed, live more fully into one’s faith. A homegrown twist on Pascal’s famous wager.

I guess half-baked is better than being raw. Half-baked means there’s yeast inside and that the dough is being punched, poked, prodded, leavened...and maybe, in time, rising.

So back to Matthew and me: Isn’t Matthew’s call...my call as well? His, then ... mine, now? Always there and yet always a total surprise -- and always the possibility of a merciful fresh start? Aren’t I as much a distracted citizen of this seductive world, seeking to tune out or turn away from the invitation to follow Jesus? And even if Jesus’ call were pitch-perfect in my heart and head, aren’t I even more astonished – like Matthew of old – that Jesus calls ME? Not just those with an enviable sense of self-awareness, but even more so those of us grappling with our conflicted sense of worth...and worthiness? Those of us still sorting out who we are and who we are meant to be...the unsure, the doubting, the fickle, the flawed and failing?

That the call of Jesus to me – yes, to me – continues to this day: What a gift. What a challenge.