In seminary we spoke of our “call” to the ministry. Some had heard God speak to them. Others had realized, after years of interpersonal engagement and active lay leadership, that something inside of them was pushing them to professional ministry. Some had come to faith and then been told by their own ministers that the church needed their special talents. Some, like the Roman Catholic women, had been called loud and clear--but were serving their church as lay leaders because they could not enter the priesthood.

The image of call comes from the Hebrew Bible, where more than one prophet is surprised to hear the voice of God calling their name. In the iconic story of the call of the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah at first protests that he is not suited to the job God wants to give him. After receiving a vision of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob seated on a throne, surrounded by cosmic attendants, Isaiah protests: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the Monarch, the Holy One of hosts (6:5)!" God then purifies Isaiah’s lips with a hot coal and sanctifies him for the work of calling the people of Israel and Judah back to the ways of their ancestors. The northern kingdom of Israel was then under the thumb of the Assyrian empire, and Judah felt the threat keenly.

A prophet was not someone who, as we have come to understand the word, predicted the future. A prophet in ancient Israel was someone who took up the special message God had for God’s people, and who, in turn, stood up for the people with an
all-powerful God. Israel often imagined its relationship with its God as a kind of vassal-lord relationship: we will follow the law and worship you, God, and in exchange you’ll protect us from our enemies and help us prosper. Prophets negotiated that relationship, and became especially important when Israel and Judah found themselves fighting for survival against their much more powerful neighbors: the Assyrians, the Persians, and the Romans. Some of the most compelling poetry of ancient Judaism comes out of these periods of threat and exile, and it is put in the mouths of the prophets of the people.

I’m sure some of my fellow students had calls to the ministry no less dramatic than Isaiah’s. My own was not quite so clear-cut. I have come to see my path toward the ministry as an experience of waking up to what I was supposed to do with my life. I have always loved church, attending every week from the time I was a little girl. Then when I was eleven we started going to a Unitarian Universalist church in the suburbs of Detroit and I saw that women could be ministers. I found that there was a church where I could wrestle with the meaning of Christianity and explore goddess spirituality. Then I began to see all the things a minister did: writing, leadership, counseling, performance, teaching, theology. I realized that these were things I loved. Then it all clicked when I was in college: ministry was a profession! a calling! a path for a life! the path for my life! and I set out upon it. Now, having been a minister for almost nine years, I see there were other possibilities, other paths that would have fulfilled me and allowed me to live out my work in the world. But now I also see how committed I am to the ministry and how my work with this congregation sustains me. I am still excited every time I see the
power of people coming together despite all the things which might keep them apart. The right path and I found each other.

All of us have calls to answer in our lives. Professional ministry is only one way to live out a call. Kathy Wileczko, a social worker at Speare Memorial Hospital, pointed out to me that the same is true of social work. All sorts of people do social work, she said, and only some of them have the letters “MSW” after their names. In fact, the people who don’t have those three letters are in many ways more free to do more kinds of good work than people who do. Churches can give financial assistance, provide counseling, even house families in times of crisis. Neighbors can help care for children when their parents fall on the hardest of times. Friends can encourage one another to seek medical care, enter counseling, or help find hospice care for aging parents. All these resources are sought out by professional social workers, yet all of them are also, and more freely, done by non-professionals all the time.

Kathy’s point was that as a professional social worker, she had an opportunity to make her living by helping people find their way forward from the hospital. But she is also bound by a professional code of conduct and limits on what she can and can’t do, both as a professional social worker and as an employee of the hospital. All the other people who surround a patient, who help hold that person in prayer while he is in the hospital and who will help bring him home, are in some ways much freer to help than Kathy is. People depend on the kindness of those around them much more than they depend on professional social workers.

The same is true of ministry. Having the professional training for ministry allows me to pursue a living in church leadership. But all of us practice ministry to one another
and to our communities. Leadership in this congregation is a ministry. Living the life of
the spirit in your everyday life is a kind of ministry. Standing up and speaking out for a
better world is ministry. These are all ways of answering a call, a moment when the
Spirit, perhaps through the voice of another person or perhaps speaking quietly in your
own heart, said to you, “Won’t you join me?” I wonder: what are you being called to be
in your life?

Now, you may feel that you are being called to the ordained ministry. I would love
to talk to you about your call and your dreams for the future. Our congregations are the
source of our ministry. Your experiences in lay leadership and commitment to Unitarian
Universalism as a lay person may be leading you toward seminary and the ministry, or
perhaps toward the training needed to become a professional religious educator. I
welcome conversations about these calls, whatever form they may take.

Once we hear a call to follow the Spirit, there is the next step of how to follow it.
The question is not just what our call is, but what our covenant is with ourselves and
with the source of that call. In spiritual terms, “covenant” is another idea that comes to
us from the ancient Jewish tradition. I talked already about how the nation of Israel (later
the two nations of Israel and Judah) understood their relationship with their God. They
saw it as an agreement of fealty from the people to the lord and protection from the lord
to the people. When the Israelites were embarked on their great exodus, God spoke to
Moses from the mountaintop and said, “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep
my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the
whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a...holy nation (Ex. 19: 5-6).” The covenant
is a straightforward agreement. If the people do this, God will do that. The entire
narrative tension of the history of the people Israel comes from the efforts on both sides to uphold this sacred covenant.

Now, God may not speak to you from mountaintops. You may not hear a call in words, or enter into a covenant with an if...then clause. Your understanding of the divine may be a feeling within yourself, or a sense of human possibility, or a silent understanding. Your covenant will be with this God of your understanding. Your covenant will be with your own sense of what is possible for your spirit as part of the human spirit. We are not bound to think of a covenant in the lord-vassal relationship that was prevalent in the ancient Near East. Our covenant is with our promise to ourselves. Our covenant is with what we are being called to be and to become. Our covenant is our promise to ourselves to deepen our relationship to the spirit, and our trust in that Spirit that it will see us through the transformation.

Attention to our relationship with the Spirit is not self-indulgent. Episcopal priest Jeff Golliher, a leader in connecting spirituality and ecology, writes, “It’s better to think of self-awareness as one part of the Holy Mystery that our whole lives are part of; and in perceiving this, we understand that even the smallest, seemingly insignificant, and broken parts of our lives are part of the Mystery too (35).” Our call and covenant could be waiting for us anywhere in our lives. Conversations with the spirit happen not only in the religious congregation, or when we are feeling properly sanctified. The spirit can come to us at any moment, through any aspect of our lives. Our whole beings are attuned to the holy mystery, as Golliher calls it. No part of us is left out.

I have been engaged lately with what the Spirit is asking of me. I have felt its call more deeply and been drawn into conversation with it again and again. As much as I
like to read and wrestle with the thoughts of others, this is coming to seem insufficient to me now. The Spirit is hovering just above me, beckoning me into a more direct and fulfilling relationship. It seems to me that path to that relationship is through meditation and prayer—through the silence I have always found daunting and through the surrender to the spirit which has frightened off others before me. My covenant—my agreement with this Spirit and what it is asking of me—is to engage in the relationship, through silence if that is where it takes me, through surrender if I must, and trust the outcome. The spiritual journey is ongoing. The ministry we all share in the world calls us ever onward.

I was asked recently why I chose the ministry, not how I happened upon this path and this call but why, knowing what it would involve, I stuck with the path anyway. I answered that I believe people are better together than they are alone. Many things separate us. We are of different ethnicities, different financial means, different ages and different interests. Our religious understandings are very different, and if you leave the walls of this fellowship, our religious understandings may be very different from those of the larger community. Yet people sustain each other and come together across those differences. The Spirit grows among us when we gather together beyond the limits of what we can do and be alone. Your call and covenant will be from and with the God of your understanding. They will engage your human spirit. I invite you to live them out in joy and companionship with the fellow spirits on the journey here.

Please join me in prayer.

Spirit, be with us. Wisdom, be with us. We ask for courage as we walk the paths of our hearts. We ask for patience as we look for truth in love. We ask for the
illumination to know where the next step will land. We ask for companions on the journey.

We ask for ears to hear our call in the world. We ask for understanding as we learn what the call is asking of us and asking us to become. We ask for the courage to answer it. We ask for the wisdom to follow it.

In strength, humility and faith we seek to enter into a covenant with our greater being. Help us become the people we want to be. Help us to pass on a better world to our children and our children’s children. Help us grow the spirit among us, to be greater together than we are alone. Amen.

Sources

All Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.