

Fear and the Call of God

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“But Ananias protested, ‘I have heard from many sources about Saul and how much harm this Rabbi has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. Saul now is here and has authorization from the chief priests to arrest everybody who calls on Your name.’” — Acts 9:13-14.

If you have not heard about this, Bonnie and I have had a hectic week— even two weeks. First, I’ll list the church related hectic. I had an interment and two celebrations of life, commonly called funerals. This was Newsletter week— always hectic— a breakfast meeting earlier in the week and, of course, there was the usual— services had to be planned and sermons written.

And this week Bonnie had the New York Conference Women’s Retreat at Watson Homestead. I’ve heard very good reports about that from all those who went. I suppose it will not surprise you to hear she has become the official photographer of the Conference Women’s retreat. In fact next year when we intend to be living in the great State of Maine, the group is insisting they want her back.

Speaking of the great State of Maine, as we head toward retirement— or is it as we hurtle toward retirement— that is the other thing that made these two weeks hectic. We went to Maine... twice. The first trip, when we were house hunting, was planned. But currently there is not a lot of inventory so nothing came of that trip.

But on Monday morning last at about 8:00 a.m., a house was put on <realtor.com> which looked like it might be right for us. By 10:00 a.m. I was on the phone with our realtor. The entry said bids on the house were closing on Friday. Bids on a house closing in five days— that ought to give you an idea about how hot the housing market is where we are trying to go.

Early Tuesday morning the realtor did a FACETIME with us from the property. While that gave us a feel for what it was like, it was decided we really needed to see the place. And so Tuesday at about 12:30 we were off to Maine, our second trip in two weeks. As I said, the first one was planed; this one... not so much.

We got to Brunswick Tuesday evening at about 8:15 p.m— meaning we made really good time on the highway— had dinner and settled into a room at the Fairfield Inn. We were at a hotel because there had not been enough time to contact friends and ask to stay with them as we had done on previous trips.

Wednesday morning at 8:25 a.m. we met the realtor and saw the place in the flesh. We got on the road back to Norwich by 9:15 a.m. It was good we saw the house in person. As we drove south we talked about it and realized the house was not right for us.

As effective as pictures on the web are once we were there, in the house, we knew *for us* something was not quite right with that property. I am not even sure I can tell you what that something was.

We again made good time on the return trip. That drive is often at least eight hours, usually closer to nine. We made it back by 4:45, a mere seven hours and forty-five minutes on the road.

I was glad we made it back since there was yet another church reason for being here Wednesday evening. At 6:30 the Interfaith Council presented a Chenango County Day of Prayer in front of the courthouse steps right outside this building. Having returned, I was able to participate.

In any case, let me offer this advice. Please do not try to go to Maine twice in two weeks. And please do not try

to go to Maine and back in about 28 hours. It ain't easy. It's somewhere southwest of hectic.

That story brings me to a statement of fact. No— Bonnie and I do not have a place to call our own in Maine even though we started seriously looking in February.

This week I will probably begin to explore rental properties— the cat is always a problem when it comes to rental properties— I will start to explore rental properties since we are running out of time. And yes, this is not just hectic. This is becoming a little more like scary.

At least in general, we know where we want to be. We have not yet found out exactly where or exactly how we will get that done. (Slight pause.)

This is what we find in the work known as Luke/Acts in the section commonly labeled as Acts: “But Ananias protested, ‘I have heard from many sources about Saul and how much harm this Rabbi has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. Saul now is here and has authorization from the chief priests to arrest everybody who calls on Your name.’” (Slight pause.)

Clearly, the first part of this story we heard from Acts is about Saul. Now I have said this before but I'll mention it again. Despite popular legends and despite what is depicted in a myriad of bad Renaissance paintings which picture this conversion episode, Saul is not knocked off a horse of any kind. That is not in the text.

Saul simply falls to the ground. And, given what is written, I think we can safely state Saul is overwhelmed, even fearful.

That having been said, it is not the story of Saul which recently caught my attention. I suddenly noticed the story of Ananias had parallels to what happened to Saul. Yes, Saul is overwhelmed, frightened. But so is the faithful servant Ananias.

Indeed, let me translate what Ananias says into Twenty-first Century English for you. “Yo! God! You want me to do what?” Ananias is afraid and rightfully so.

We have been given all the information about Ananias we need to help us understand why this disciple is frightened. First, the Christ does not just appear to Saul. Christ also appears to Ananias. I think we tend to overlook that fact.

Second, even if only by reputation Ananias clearly knows who Saul is. Therefore, Ananias has every reason to be frightened. Think about it: Christ, who Ananias knows has been murdered by the State, appears.

Next, Ananias is told by Christ to go and heal someone who is arresting followers of Jesus. To be clear, what arresting means in this context is the people are being handed over by the temple authorities to the state, the Roman authorities, for punishment. That's the way that worked. Ananias had every reason to be scared. (Slight pause.)

Let me invite you to consider something. If we are serious about life, when we stop and think about life, at times life is hectic. I take it back. Life is always hectic.

And yes, at times life is a little more than scary. We really *don't* know what will happen tomorrow. But should that stop us from acting? (Slight pause.)

Let me invite you to consider something else. Is each of us, are all of us called by God? (Slight pause.) In her Christian Education article in the Newsletter this month Linda Oehme states the disciples were transformed from fearful people who met secretly behind closed doors into preachers and teachers.

Now, you might insist the disciples were empowered by the Holy Spirit— you know— Pentecost and all that stuff? But what makes you think we are not empowered by the Holy Spirit? Are we a post Pentecost people or are we not? (Slight pause.)

Let me come back to a personal note. One of the times we were recently in Maine a friend said it amazed him that I— and therefore we since it includes Bonnie— it amazed him that I said was headed to seminary and going into ordained ministry.

And then it happened. We followed through, made it happen. No, said I, we did not make it happen, at least not with that amount of exactness and certainty. We simply tried to be open to the call of God.

Please notice, I did not say I was sure that with any precision this was a call from God. I said I was open to the call of God. Hence, was this journey frightening? Why yes it was.

Was this journey which brought us here twenty-three ago frightening? Why yes it was.

And will our move to Maine be frightening? Why yes it will. But should that stop us from acting? (Slight pause.)

I think being open to the call of God is the key. I think that is what we see in Ananias— an openness.

And so, even if Bonnie and I wind up renting for a time when we move to Maine, we shall move because I already know I need to be open to the call of God. How can I be so sure I am being open to the call God?

Well, sure I'm not. But I do already know this. I will be peaching, filling a pulpit four times in Harpswell, Maine starting in August for a pastor who on sabbatical. And I really do not want to travel back and forth from here to Maine just to preach on those Sundays.

So really all I am trying to do (I think) is to be open. Open to what? Trying to be open to the will of God and then to act.

Where will those actions take me? I do not know. And yes, that is frightening. But neither did Ananias know. And yes, that was frightening. But acting is, I think, the key.

And, from what I hear that's what this church, this congregation will strive to do once I am ensconced in Maine— just like Ananias you will strive to be open to the call of God and act. Amen.

United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, New York
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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "Pastor Brian McLaren had said this (quote:) 'The church is not about meeting your needs; the church is about joining the people of God to meet the needs of the world.' Let me put that another way. The church is about action. I believe when we act we are better attuned to hearing the call of God than when we pretend we're a rock and do nothing."

BENEDICTION: Let us go where God leads us, for surely God leads us to embrace our neighbor with love. Let us follow where Christ has gone, and see the great commandment of loving God and loving neighbor as a watchword. And may the steadfast love of God and the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the knowledge, companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.