

THE JOY OF YES
 John 1: 29-42
 January 16, 2005 SBCC

The call to ministry comes in many ways. Sometimes it comes in a big way. It must have been big, very big, to Andrew and Simon Peter and the other unnamed disciple in our reading from John. I'm not sure that if someone simply told me "We have found the Messiah" I would immediately become a disciple. I think I'd want a little more proof. Like Peter in the dialogue we heard earlier I'd want to know where we were going, who else was going and what I'd need for the journey. John's not very explicit in stating the call stories of Andrew and Simon Peter. Nor does he tell us how they felt as they set out to follow Jesus.

Sometimes calls to ministry come in the smallest ways, in a chance meeting with someone in need, in a newspaper story you feel called upon to do something about in a telephone call.

I want, for the bulk of this sermon, to tell you a story of one minister's experience of answering a small call to ministry. Her name is Mellonee Hubbard. I don't know what denomination she is or where she lived, but I suspect in a middle size city somewhere.

The story starts during the Advent season, a busy time for most ministers. She was struggling to write her sermon on John the Baptist's call to repentance when all the congregation wanted was to sing Christmas carols. She was in her office feeling a good bit of tension when the phone rang. Let tell you the rest of the story in Melonee Hubbard's words.

"Reverend Hubbard?" "Yes," I answered.

I'm James Metcalf. I've been in a wheelchair for 57 years and spend all my time listening to other people and helping them with their problems. I wonder if you'd marry a couple who wants to get married real bad. I talked with some of the ministers here in town but they were too busy and told me to call you."

"Oh?" I said cautiously. My experience with their recommendations had taught me to be suspicious.

"Can you do it?"

"When?"

"Tonight. Can you do it?"

"Have they got a license?" (Maybe that would put a stop to it).

"No. But they'll get one right away." "Well alright."

"We'll call you later. The marriage will be at my house, 69 Pearl St."

Maybe I'll get lucky, I thought, and the county clerk's office will be closed. I thought with irritation of the fellows in the Ministerial Association always dumping on me things they didn't want to do and returned to my Advent predicament: how do I get around John the Baptist? The phone rang again.

Reverend Hubbard?"

"Yes"

"This is John Wayne Lilly. My Uncle James called you about getting married. I got the marriage license, and we want to get married in your church tonight."

"Well, I'd like to ask some questions first."

"Go ahead. Uncle James said you'd like to do some counseling. So go ahead. Counsel me."

"How long have you known the bride -to-be?"

"Four years." (That sounded good.)

"What's her name?"

"Tammy Sue Ritchie."

"How old is she?"

"Thirty-one."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-two but age don't matter. She has two children by some other man and two by me. So I have four reasons to get married. Can we be married at St. Paul? I got Jesus in jail and I'd like to be married in church. About 8:00PM."

"Well, your uncle is in a wheelchair. Can he make it?" (I was thinking of those seventeen steps into the church)>

"Yes."

A little later the phone rang again. "This is John Wayne. Did you turn the heat on?"

"No, I wanted to wait until you called."

"That's good. Good thinking. Can you marry us at the intersection?" "Intersection? You mean outside - on the street?"

"Yeah. Looks like the way things are going the police is going to bust it up. Can you marry us right now?"

I looked at my watch. It was five to five. "How about 5:30? Will that give Tammy Sue time?"

"That's fine."

"But the police will easily find you if I marry you at the intersection. Besides it's fifteen degrees - it's too cold! Why don't I marry you at your uncles house the way he originally planned?"

"OK But if the police see all my friends coming here, they'll bust it up for sure."

"Not at 5:30. Too early"

"Yeah, I got Jesus in jail and wanted to be married in church, but we'll get married at Uncle James."

"See You there."

I was looking over the marriage ritual when the phone rang for the fourth time.

"Reverend Hubbard?"

"Yes?"

"This is Henrietta Grimes. I'm the wife of John Wayne's employer. Could you possibly hold off marrying John Wayne and Tammy Sue until seven o'clock?" She needs time to get ready."

"I thought it would be rushing her. I'll come at 6:30 and fill out the forms and meet the family, and begin the ceremony at seven. Will that be alright?"

“Yes, I really appreciate you marrying them. They’ve been waiting for a long time but things keep happening to them.” She paused for a moment and then added: “Tammy Sue’s a little retarded,” and then she hung up.

Oh well, I thought. It’s not as if John Wayne hasn’t had ample opportunity in four years to find out. I read the marriage ritual over again, sighed at the beauty of it, and prayed that I would say and do the loving thing.

I drove to James Metcalf’s home located in a poor section of town and knocked on the door. When it opened, the first thing I saw was a large white Bible on a highboy next to the door, with yellow artificial flowers on it. When I stepped in, a wave of hot air hit me, along with the impression of a small room crowded with people who had not bathed in a while. A stove radiated heat and took up a third of the room. A nice looking short man, with dark hair and eyes, rushed up and introduced himself. “I’m John Wayne. Don’t call me John...I’m John Wayne. This is my uncle, James Metcalf.” A stocky man in a wheelchair, with a florid complexion, strands of blonde hair combed side ways, said, “Pleased to meet you, I’ve heard a lot about you. Kept reading about you in the paper. Kept wanting to call you. This is my mother, Mrs. Wibberly.” She was a small woman, with long black wavy hair sitting on an upholstered chair by the door. A scrawny black Chihuahua jumped down off the top of the chair and barked at me. Mr. Metcalf said, “This is my dog – Justice for All. He was doing what dogs do all over everybody equally when I saw him at the pound. So I named him Justice for All. Call him Justice for short.

John Wayne pointed to a short, thin, dark, grimy, shifty-eyed weasly man who sneaked a look at me out of the corner of his eye, keeping his body sideways. “This is my dad, John Lilly.” Lilly nodded. I thought he would be a prime suspect for a robbery or a rape. John Wayne continued: “This is my friend Tommy Applegate.” A blonde beefy teenager grinned at me vacantly. He looked more than a “bit retarded.” I thought wildly to myself does John Wayne have a fetish for this kind of person.

Then he pointed to a woman in a wheelchair – round face, dark eyes, medium length dark hair. “This is Mrs. Grimes, my boss’ wife, and this is my boss, Mr. Grimes.” Intelligence glinted out of his eyes set deep in a pleasant face. Dressed in a plaid shirt and khaki pants, he exuded authority.

I took off my coat and put it in a chair beside the stove. A small woman with elegantly chiseled nose and lips slipped shyly into the room. Her pale green dress was wrinkled, but the neckline, outlined with sequins, winked cheerily in the overhead light. Her shoulder length dishwater blonde hair waved slightly. She looked both hopeful and beaten down. “This is Tammy Sue,” John Wayne proudly announced, and hugged her. She melted into his body. I immediately relaxed. They really loved on another. Her love for him and joy at being married delicately transfigured her features. She timidly took my hand and smiled. “Do you have the rings?” I asked. “No. We didn’t have time,” John Wayne explained. “Or money, Tammy added softly. “The rings are symbolic, so we could borrow them. Do you want a double ring ceremony?” I looked at Tammy and her eyes glowed a “yes.”

Mrs. Grimes offered her ring to Tammy and Mr. Grimes gave me his. I gave it to Mr. Metcalf as best man, and said, "It's seven o'clock –time to begin."

"Let's start with a prayer," John Wayne demanded. "I got Jesus in jail and want a prayer." Mr. Metcalf put on the wedding music, a tape of "I'd rather Have Jesus than Silver and Gold." Tennessee Ernie Ford's deep tones mingled with my soprano ones as I asked for God's blessing on the wedding and God's guidance for the couple. Just as I finished, the door burst open and a short, bleached blonde woman who looked like a tougher, more sharply defined version of Tammy Sue came in. I thought she might be Tammy Sue's sister. But John Wayne abruptly said, "Bette Davis, my sister. I smiled and invited her to stand on the other side of the Mrs. Grimes. Placing myself in front of the stove, I began the ceremony.

Though I had been told that Tammy Sue was retarded, she had no trouble remembering the vows and repeated them without stumbling over them. I had to shorten them however, to two words at a time for John Wayne. I then realized that he was more than a bit retarded, but his forceful personality covered it. At that special moment in the ceremony when I joined their right hands with my right hand firmly clasping their united ones, announced them husband and wife, an intense joy welled up within me. As I looked at them tenderly kiss, I was ashamed of my former feelings at a scene only Flannery O'Connor's genius for the grotesque could capture. Instead, the love I saw shining from their faces was for me a reflection of the face of God. Much joy and satisfaction flowed from John Wayne and he proudly hugged his bride, who glowed with that special beauty brides radiate.

I thought of how adamant John Wayne was about being called John Wayne and looked over at the weasely – looking father who in a fit of hope had named his son after a bigger than life symbol of manhood, and had named his daughter Bette Davis, the byword of the liberated woman. Yet both of them did have confident take-charge personalities.

At the final prayer, John Wayne clasped Tammy Sue against him tenderly, and I exulted to myself. I don't care if the fellows in the Ministerial Association did palm them off on me as a joke. Though I had first come reluctantly, I was now happy for them. They were ecstatic at finally being married. John Wayne then asked me: "How much do you charge?"

"Well", I stalled. I'd only had two weddings and never thought of charging. John Wayne picked up my hesitation and said: "Oh, you're going to marry us free as a wedding gift." "Yes," I smiled with relief. "You are exactly right." "You don't know where we could stay tonight, do you? Our landlord kicked us out and put all our stuff out in the street in the rain. I was so mad I was going to punch him out and he called the police. He knew by threatening him I had broken my parole – so I been hiding out from the police the last two days.

I regretfully shook my head as Mr. Metcalf started taking pictures. Then someone shoved a glass into one of my hands and a piece of cake into the other. I cautiously took a sip and then relaxed. It was the right kind of coke. I toasted the bride and groom, and basked in the satisfaction everyone shared. They had all wanted this marriage, but jail, lack of funds, and one disaster after another had prevented it.

Soon after, I took pictures of the whole group, then picked up my coat, shook hands with everyone again, and walked toward the door as Chrissie Lang sang “The Last Word in Jesus Is Us.” As I went out the door, Mrs. Wibberly, John Wayne’s grandmother, who had not said a word the whole time I was there but had stared at me avidly, reached out and grabbed my hand and said, “I just can’t get over it! You look and act just like my sister. You make me feel so good. You’re one of us!”

*Automatically, I thanked her, walked on out, and shut the door. Numbly, I thought: “I? One of them? Here I thought myself better than that family – in and out of jail – drunk and stoned half the time. And all the time I looked like the aunt of that weasely, dirty man! Every atom of my body resisted the pain of it and then a bubble of laughter welled up in my throat and rang out providing a descant to Chrissie Lane’s *The Last Word in Jesus Is US.*”*

I don’t remember driving home, but came to myself sitting in my driveway in the car transfixed and transformed and transfigured. I bowed my head on the steering wheel, gave thanks to God for Mrs. Wibberly’s words and repented. I felt a vision of something more and better overwhelming me with the knowledge that I loved all of them, that they were mine and I was “one of them,” that never again would we be strangers.

“By God, I am one of them,” I repeated, amazed. “And proud of it!” I thought of that hour together as a sacrament, a holy communion, where God was touched, tasted and known. The final benediction given by the grandmother, “You are one of us” reinforced by the words of Chrissie Lane’s “The Last Word of Jesus is us.” It was almost zero outside, but I was warm inside the car, awed by being struck with the transforming power of God. I rejoiced that the prejudiced branch, the diseased layer of my identity that had distanced me from any of God’s children was cut away. And I thought of their dog being named Justice – the only justice they’d experience – and I remembered the words of Amos:

“Though you offer me burnt offerings, I will not accept them. I hate and despise your feasts and religious services. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an overflowing stream.

“I’m one of them” I sang out. “Justice for all,” I vowed and singing “the Last Word in Jesus is us,” marched into the parsonage, called the Colonial Motel and arranged for John Wayne and Tammy Sue to stay there one night – courtesy of the Ministerial Association.

My question is this: when the first telephone call came from James Metcalf, what if Melonee Hubbard had said, “No?”