

# *Follow Your Heart – Hear God’s Call*

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First Baptist Church, Kansas City, MO

Dr. Stephen D. Jones, preaching

Text: Isaiah 61:1-6

To follow one’s heart --- is there any better advice to offer our high school graduates? Don’t take the safe or convenient path, or the path that others expect of you. Follow your heart! When we don’t follow our heart, we can expect nothing but heartache. What results is a dis-connect between what we are intended to do, what God calls us to do, and what we end up doing.

I have known young people who have followed a big-money career, or a career that is market-driven, only to discover that their heart was not in it. By taking the wrong path, their heart, which could have been engaged, had languished.

There’s a relatively new expression that has captured my imagination. A flourishing church needs to develop a “culture of call,” in which ministry resonates through every dimension of its life. What is a culture of call?

- 1) It is a church that encourages members to follow their hearts by listening for and responding to God’s call.
- 2) It is a church where ministry is democratized, that gives wide encouragement for members and friends to see themselves as ministers of the gospel
- 3) It is a congregation where every vocation, avocation, hobby and career is viewed through the lens of ministry.
- 4) It is a congregation that offers wide support of one another in their personal and shared ministries
- 5) It is a church where intercessory prayer centers around preparation and empowerment for ministry
- 6) It is a church that is a breeding ground for ministry!

In a Baptist church, ministry is democratized. It is not the possession of the pastor. I hope you will not call me the “minister” of the church because it is not only inaccurate but it is disempowering of everyone else who is also a minister. You become a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in your baptismal vows. You may go into the water as a sinner, but you do not come up out of the water as a saint! You come out of the water with a life-calling to be a minister of the Gospel. Anyone who is a follower of Jesus must “take up one’s cross and follow him.” I ask you: Who are the ministers of this church? And the answer is: We are the ministers of this church. Being a Christian should make us a different kind of father, a different kind of daughter, a different kind of colleague, a different kind of neighbor, a different kind of volunteer, a different approach to a vocation. If it doesn’t, something is amiss.

I am your pastor – and in that role, my work is to support you in your ministry and help us fully develop a culture of call in our congregation. Contrary to the public image, my primary work is behind the scenes, as I encourage you to claim your ministries.

Baptists believe in the priesthood of all believers, which means that we do not have an elevated class of ministry. All believers are called to be priests to each other. We pray for one another. We lay hands upon one another. We are conduits of God's love to each other. We are each windows to the active Presence of God. We don't need a "priestly class" to connect with God or to act on behalf of God in the church or the world. The Baptist understanding is utterly democratic: we don't rank one kind of ministry as more special, more valued, than others.

To follow one's heart – that means we have to listen to our heart – listen for the Holy Spirit that whispers in our heart. When I returned home from college during my freshman year, it was the tradition of my home church that the college students would lead the evening service the first Sunday after Christmas. And the sermon was given by a junior or senior in college. Only the numbers of young adults were dwindling, and several key upperclassmen were away that Christmas. And finally, in last-minute desperation, they asked me, as a freshman, if I would preach that Sunday night. I had never preached in my life. It was kind of an honor to be asked, and so I accepted. I enjoyed public speaking and preaching a sermon shouldn't be very different from delivering a speech. I have no recollection of what I preached or what happened that evening. I remember standing in front of the organ, down in front, where all the students had gathered and members of the congregation were coming forward to congratulate us. And Corinne, a close friend of my mother, walked forward to me and said in the loudest voice, "Steve, you're going to be a preacher someday." I wanted to duct tape her mouth. I knew that was never going to happen and I was deeply offended that she thrust her expectations on me in such a public way. "She had no right to say that to me," I remember thinking.

Corinne's prophesy hit very close to home. I went back to college and I couldn't get it out of my mind – even though it had been the furthest thing from my mind up to that point. It turns out that I hadn't been listening to my heart. I had been so head-strong as to be heart-deaf.

A deep sense of dis-ease came over me that I could not shake. When I reluctantly came to the conclusion that my heart and the Holy Spirit were talking to me – I realized that pastoral vocation was the only resolution. It was like the frayed pieces of my young life finally fit together. The vocation, which at first I dreaded and disliked, has grown on me over the years. How else could I explain beginning a long-term pastoral relationship with you at my age – except for my love for pastoral ministry.

That isn't to say that there haven't been struggles. Pastors work with people and that can be frustrating. Three friends went deer hunting: a lawyer, a doctor and a pastor. As they came up over a hill, they all saw a big buck at the same time, and they all pointed and shot at the same time. The deer fell. The lawyer said, "It's mine. I'm sure it was my

bullet that killed it.” The doctor said, “Wait a minute. Maybe I can examine the deer and see which bullet killed him.” After careful examination, the doctor pronounced, “Well, it’s the preacher’s, alright. The bullet went in one ear and came out the other!”

Soon after I decided to enter pastoral ministry, I was like a baseball player without a team. I knew that I could not enter ministry as a Southern Baptist. And then someone recommended that I check out First Baptist Church. The decision to make an appointment with Mal Haughey, and then attend worship, and then join this church, and begin my pastoral vocation here, has made all the difference. I don’t know what would have happened had God not led me to this church 45 years ago.

We took one step together toward developing a culture of call by setting aside an Individual Ministries Commissioning Sunday last October, just a few Sundays after I came to serve you. 27 people came forward at the end of that service and Dave Davis led us in a prayer of blessing and commissioning.

This church has always had a strong sense of call to ministry as an unusually high number of our young people have entered Christian vocations of counseling, pastoring, serving as missionaries. My name is on that list. So is Dave Davis. So is Jim Hallquist. So is Marise Tuttle. So was R.H. Brown, an African American ordained by our church in 1882. The list of those who have responded is impressive. While all are called into ministry, we celebrate when one of our own experiences a call to pastoral vocation.

In one of my churches, about mid-point in my tenure, a group of young men, one by one, began quitting their jobs working for large corporations and climbing the corporate ladder. There isn’t anything wrong with these jobs, but they just didn’t feel called to do that any longer. And each one of them took up something more entrepreneurial that tugged at their heart. One took up professional photography. One left college teaching and took up woodworking. One started his own business. One left teaching in a child care facility and began designing sets for children’s museums. One became a consultant working out of his home while caring for his young children. One went back to school to enter a new career. In short, these young men listened to their hearts.

In this era in which ready-made jobs are in such shortage, I wonder if more people ought not consider entrepreneurial visions: to do something you have always dreamed of doing – to follow your heart. If ready-made jobs aren’t available, wouldn’t it be exciting if we had a group of people in our church supporting one another as they discover how there could be a better fit between earning a living and following one’s heart?

There is a way to spell the difference between a career, how one makes a living, and a vocation. The Latin word for vocation is *vocare* which means a calling, a summons. Paul writes, “I beg you to lead a life worthy of the vocation to which you have been called...” (Eph. 4:1) In Greek, the word for call is *Kaleo*, a word used 147 times in the New Testament. Many people would be ready to earn far less money if they were doing something that expressed their innermost values, something from the heart, a vision

uniquely their own. Other people have a day job, but once they get off the job, their true ministry begins as a volunteer.

When Jesus returned to Nazareth, at the beginning of his ministry, he told his hometown neighbors where his new-found ministry was taking him. He said, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, called me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners...” He was reading from the Prophet Isaiah, who turned this statement outward to all: “you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God.” (61:6)

What about you? Are you called? How are you engaged in ministry? Are you following your heart? Are you responding to God’s call?

Let us tell the world of Isaiah’s vision: “you shall be called priests of the Lord, all of you, and you shall be named ministers of our God, each one of you.” I ask you again, “Who are the ministers of this church?” And you respond, “We are the ministers of this church.”

One of the most inspiring examples of call out of our American Baptist heritage is Elizabeth Barrett Montgomery. She was never a pastor. She never attended seminary. She was an active lay leader in her beloved Lake Avenue Baptist Church in Rochester. Yet, she was the first woman to translate the New Testament into English. She was the first woman to serve as President of any denomination when she was elected to lead our denomination. She helped establish the World Day of Prayer. She was a strong voice for social reform in her city. She helped organize the Women’s American Baptist Foreign Mission Society and served as its president for twelve years. She went on a national speaking tour raising \$1 million for missions, an equivalent of more than \$23 million today. She was the first woman elected to the Rochester School Board, twenty years before women had the right to vote. In 1923, she spoke before the third Baptist World Congress saying, “Jesus is the Great Emancipator of women.” Few pastors could come close to the impact of Helen’s ministry in her city, her denomination, and throughout the world. She inspires us to be engaged in our own ministries, no matter how local that may be.

Helen followed her heart. She didn’t let prerequisites, or a glass ceiling, or the stereotypes of her day stand in her way. God was calling Helen to an unprecedented number of “firsts”...to go where no other woman had yet gone.

God called. Helen responded. When someday they write my life-story, or yours, wouldn’t it be stunning if the answer could be summed up in these four words: “God called. Steve responded.” God called, Susan responded. God called, Jim responded. God called, Pat responded, God called...

Again, I ask, who are the ministers of this church? We are the ministers of this church! Amen.