

Third Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/A): “Repeat After Me: ‘I Am a Minister’”

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 27; Matthew 4:12-23

January 24-25, 2026

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

God’s call comes in different shapes and sizes. The call can come early or late in a person’s life. Some calls are dramatic and others are garden variety. They’re all precious and important! We each have one.

Any of us who grew up Roman Catholic remember the continual urging to “pray for vocations.” Vocation means call or calling. But when we were asked to pray for vocations, we knew that meant asking God to call people to “the religious life,” meaning to become a priest, a brother, a nun or a sister. Not a lot of folks were lining up then or are lining up now to live a celibate life, to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. No manner how many prayers we prayed, the numbers of priests and nuns kept plummeting. As children we knew that God also calls people to be husbands and wives, parents, doctors, teachers, but we definitely got the impression that all **those** states of life were definitely lower on the totem pole. I remember one of the Sisters of Christian Charity who taught us asking our class, “How will you serve God when you grow up?” One of the boys frustrated her no end by answering he was going to be a baseball player. “But how will you serve God?” “By being a baseball player!”

Vocation can also mean profession or career. I might ask someone, “What’s your vocation in this world?” and he might answer, “I’m a realtor.” She might answer, “I’m an engineer.” When someone refers to their career as a vocation, there’s a sense they see it as a holy calling, their way to serve God. Being an accountant or a lawyer, a soldier or a mechanic, a salesperson or a gas station attendant may not seem like a “religious” way to

make a living, but it **can** be if we live out our Christianity in the workplace with integrity, honesty, compassion, consciously seeing ourselves serving God through serving our neighbor.

When I was going to seminary and was still Roman Catholic, I wrote an article for *Notre Dame Magazine* about being a hospital chaplain. I was thrilled that they sent a photographer to take my picture and even gave me a stipend. But when it was published I was mortified at the header: "I Call Myself a Minister." I was quick to tell anyone who read it, "I didn't pick the title." It seemed presumptuous. It seemed wrong. I thought people would criticize me for pretending to be someone I was not.

I look back now, smile at my young self, and marvel at the journey on which the Holy Spirit has taken me. For over thirty years I've been able to honestly say, without any hesitancy or embarrassment, "I Call Myself a Pastor" ☺. And I look out and say to each of you, "**You** can call **yourself** 'minister'!" It's Holy Baptism and not ordination that sets us apart to **be** the Lord's and to **do** the Lord's work in this world.

I've always admired people who knew from little on up what they wanted to be when they grew up. What I wanted to be changed with the seasons. During the Winter Olympics I wanted to be an ice skater. When I read a spy novel I wanted to be a spy. When we prayed for vocations I was afraid God wanted **me** to be a missionary and go to Africa. (I confided that fear to one of the kind Sisters who taught us, and she assured me that if **God** wanted that of me, **I'd** also want it so badly I'd be willing to swim there!)

Some folks always knew what they wanted to become, like a veterinarian, in which case as children they covered their stuffed animals with band-aids, swaddled their paws in gauze, pretended to feed them with baby bottles. For others, finding a career that fits their

abilities and personality is more of a huckle-buckle-beanstalk exercise. They try on multiple careers till they find one that fits. Sometimes a person starts out happy in a career, then makes a sharp change of direction. It was a radical shift for Peter and Andrew, James and John to leave their fishing boats, follow Jesus, and become itinerant preachers. But apparently the time was right and they were more-than-ready when Jesus extended His call to them. St. Mark is the evangelist who **most** loves the word “immediately,” but St. Matthew uses it in today’s Gospel: *“Immediately [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed him.”* (Matt. 4:20) *“Immediately [James and John] left the boat and their father and followed him.”* (Matt. 4:22) It’s such a quick and drastic response it’s almost weird, no matter how charismatic Jesus’ personality was. It’s okay for us to guess that Jesus and these fishermen weren’t meeting each other for the first time on the day He called them to follow.

Jesus calls each of us, too. **We** have a holy vocation, divine work to do in this world; He calls each of us to follow Him. Then He calls us to call others to follow Him, too. Just like He told some of His disciples, *“Come and see,”* He asks us to invite others, *“Come and see.”* Inviting others may seem very foreign to us, but I’ve seen many of you do it gracefully and apparently effortlessly. Maybe you invited a friend to *“Come and see”* the healing service and luncheon. Maybe you invited a relative to worship with you on Christmas or Easter. Maybe you invited a neighbor to join us for Bible study or a co-worker to come to Lessons and Carols. Maybe you didn’t encourage anyone to come here with you, but you told someone that our faith family would pray for them. These are all ways of “fishing for people,” as Jesus tells Peter and Andrew, James and John, He’s calling them to do.

Is anyone really going to think you're a holy roller or that you're "overstepping" by offering to pray for them? You don't have to offer to pray **with** them (though depending on the circumstances that would be pretty cool); just offer to pray **for** them. Consider Foodtown, Shop-Rite, Wawa, 7-11, a good place to practice your faith ☺. I was grocery shopping the other day and decided the checker and the customer in front of me must be friends, since the checker was sharing some pretty heavy stuff about medical issues. I still don't know if they **are** friends, or if the customer politely asked, "How are you today?" and the checker decided to be totally honest instead of mumbling, "Fine, thank you." In any case, when it was my turn I said, "I couldn't help overhearing you've got a lot going on. I'll say a prayer for you. Actually, I'm a pastor and our church will pray for you." She said, "I know, I was at a wedding you performed." Small world. Especially here at the Shore?

My shock and dismay at the headline "I Call Myself a Minister" is very far behind me. Now I'd like **you** to try it on for size. Except don't say, "I call myself a minister"; say, "I **am** a minister." Your ministry probably isn't in a church building. It's in a classroom or at a cosmetics counter; it's on a playing field or in a pub; it's in a boardroom, at a book club or in a boiler room; it's in a library or in a law office. It's on a train or in a plane. Your ministry, whatever it is, is as valid and essential as mine. Our ministry's power isn't necessarily determined by **what** we do, but by **how** we do it. "*Do everything with love,*" wrote Paul to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:14) That's the ultimate litmus test of how well we're living our lives and how faithfully we're following Jesus. "Am I living in love?" John of the Cross once wrote: "Love. It's all that I do." Not a bad resume. Amen

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