

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Second Sunday After The Epiphany
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
January 18, 2015

The work, I believe, we bring to scripture texts is to find within the spoken or written words, that which both comforts and that which challenges us. We want our relationship with God to be rooted in God's everlasting and intimate love of us, which we search for and find in our scriptures, and we want our lives: our actions, beliefs, and feelings, to be challenged, so we can live the gospel faithfully within community.

Our texts today set up us to do exactly this work, of finding comfort and challenge, locked together, within our holy scripture.

Our stories from Samuel and from the gospel writer John are often termed call narratives, for they depict the truth of God's calling to each one of us. Samuel heard the voice of God; Philip and Nathaniel heard the voice of God's Son, Jesus, and all of their lives were changed forever. Partly because of the specific call given to each of them, but I believe, mostly because God's direct initiative to engage them in God's work revealed to them that God knows each one of us deeply, individually, and intentionally.

We are known and loved by God, intimately. God knows the inner most parts of our being, whether or not we have made the choice to let God in. This is the truth that comforts us, although at times, this intimate knowledge of ourselves by God or anyone else can seem scary. It can be unnerving for us to know the deepest part of our being is known by someone else, either a person with whom we intimately share our lives, or by God.

I remember when my son Phillip was a baby, he would study my face with such intensity and I knew somehow he was memorizing it onto his soul, not just as my child being able to recognize my face, but by doing so, was peering into my very soul. And it was a bit unnerving at first. Often at the communion rail, I bend the knee of my heart in gratitude, as I can tell you have afforded me the opportunity to create the space in your soul, for God to peer directly into your soul, as you are fed by the living Christ. I sense a yearning in your hearts for God to recognize you and call you by name, as God called Samuel, and as Jesus called Phillip and Nathaniel.

Our texts remind us that our relationship with God is a pattern of call of response; God initiating and us responding by faithful living.

This pattern of call of response is so basic in our understanding of our relationship with God that we as Anglicans have set up our pattern of worship to allow for opportunities to respond to God; the lector saying, "the Word of the Lord" and we responding, "Thanks be to God." The celebrant beginning both the liturgy of the word and the table, by saying, "the Lord be with you" and the people gathered responding, "And also with you," And the

presider of the Eucharist inviting and calling God's people forward, by saying, "The gifts of God for the people of God."

God initiates, God's word is heard and responded to, God's invitation is made clear, and we respond with bended knee.

If we took these two texts, without putting them up against Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we may believe that God's call to us is private or individual. God's call to us is most certainly personal, but Paul's letter is the corrective that God's call to us is to be discerned and lived out in community. Our two call narratives actually also make that clear, for Samuel needed Eli to help him open his heart to God's words; And Jesus called Philip and then Philip called Nathaniel. Call happens in community.

Now Paul was writing this pastoral letter to the people in Corinth, and in this section, mainly talking about appropriate behavior in regards to sexuality. Paul feared they were misunderstanding what "freedom in Christ" really meant. There were some in that city, who believed freedom in Christ meant freedom from laws, and that anything went. That our standing before God was not dependent upon our standing before the law any longer, and that meant that they were free from all the rules governing their behavior.

Paul countered this position by teaching them that as Christians their freedom came from belonging to Christ, and if you belong to Christ, you are not your own; you are a part of the greater whole. Your freedom is not to act without concern for each other, but rather your freedom is to answer God's call and love your fellow believers.

So Paul countered the idea that freedom in Christ meant there were no restrictions on one's behavior by first adding the qualifier that one's behavior must be beneficial to building up the body. Paul's touchstone for what benefits the Corinth community of believers is what is done in love. It sounds pretty simple doesn't it, but we all know, there are times we miss the mark, and our behavior is not beneficial nor helpful to others, that our actions are not, as Paul eloquently articulates in his letter to the Corinthians, as love should be: patient, kind, generous, humble, truthful, and self-giving. It is this kind of love which builds up the church. All else, pulls it apart.

Paul is rather clear that when we decide how to act in community, the question to ask ourselves is not, what is permitted, or what we can get away with doing or saying, but rather, what is beneficial for the building up of the community.

It reminds of what I know I've shared with you before, Desmond Tutu's criteria he taught his daughters, that before they acted or spoke, they need to reflect, "Is this kind?" and "Is this necessary?". Wise words, don't you think? Is it necessary, not necessary to satisfy our own need to say or do it, but is it necessary, is it beneficial to building up the community.

When we put the sense of personal call of God to each one of us within the framework of what is beneficial to the community, we can better understand Martin Luther's term "priesthood of all believers". For it means that all Christians are called to mediate God's

grace to one's neighbor, that our human words of pardon, encouragement, and hope can become, through the power of the Spirit, God's own words to others. And that's what is beneficial to a community.

There is a mutuality and interdependence among our calls. None is to dominate. Each one of us is to respect, encourage, and build up the call in our neighbor. It can be simply illustrated by the fact that for me to fully live into my call as your priest and pastor, to be one to offer you support, comfort, and challenge when necessary, or to offer you a listening heart, or to fan the flame of your call and draw you into a ministry which is yours to offer, I simply need you to do it with me. I cannot be a priest alone. And neither can anyone of us do our ministry alone. For each of us to be all who we can be, we need each other, to flesh out, to fill out, to expand and to affirm the call we hear in each other's hearts. We are to live in mutual respect of one another, for each one of us carries the light of Christ within, and that is to be honored.

I thought I might be able to, but find I cannot resist sharing this poignant and clear image, which someone in the healing prayer group raised last week, when we were talking about the value of discussing texts in a small group, where one person's idea can be taken by another, and expanded or illuminated, or made fuller by another's reaction or statement.

This person, who prefers to remain anonymous, although gave me permission to share, offered the very concrete image of what happens when we are open in a small group to conversation and new ideas - it's like we go around the group, and as though with a scripto or candle lighter, we light each other's candles, which now burn more brightly with new insight and clarity. We have used our thoughts, actions, or feelings to be beneficial to the community. We have offered a small part of ourselves, often in vulnerability, to each other, and the light of Christ is brighter, and the kingdom has come near.

Now as you consider a room of people, such as are now, and we see our mutual calling to light each other's candles, so they may burn brighter with the love and light of Christ, that's a beautiful image. It is not just a matter of practicality on Christmas Eve that we light our individual candle from the person before us, and then we offer that light, that light we have taken from someone else and made our own, and we offer to the person next to us. It is a symbol of our unity, mutuality, and common life, which we as Christians are committed to build up.

So as we know, one candle can light another candle, can take the darkness away from someone else's life: a kind word, a warm embrace, a phone call, a note, a smile. There are candles that can take away the darkness and leave light in its place.

However, when the sense of what is beneficial to all is lacking, a candle can also cast a dark shadow upon another candle, nearly extinguishing that candle's flame or impact. When this happens, we are encouraged to hear again Paul's words in his first letter to Corinthians. "All things are lawful, but I will not be dominated by anything.", for when

we desire our candle to burn more brightly than others, our light actually gets dimmer, and we are dominated by our own diminishment.

I believe 16th century theologian John Calvin was right, who wrote on this passage by making this enduring point - our lives are appropriately ordered when they are oriented by devotion to a good that extends beyond our own designs and beyond both our control and our complete comprehension.

To order our lives thusly, we are called to pray. Simply, the more that we pray, the more we are taken deeper within ourselves and at the same time, the more we are taken out of ourselves. Prayer calls us to a view of life larger than the present ever can. Prayer is a soul stretching process that binds us to the each other. It's an odd thing, for prayer can seem so individual or private, just as our call from God can, and yet the demands of prayer are such that we are more and more connected with each other, and we find it is impossible to be one with God and not one with each other. We find the joy in that there is nothing and no one that doesn't concern us.

Some people talk about this spiritual place of oneness with God and one another the way others refer to actual physical locations, as being a thin place, where there is very little between it or between us and God.

Our scripture texts this morning locked together tell us the truth that this thin place is within us; within that place where God knows and intimately loves us, where God calls us to respond to that love. Our journey is within our own souls, within our own relationships, and within this community of believers, gathered with the express purpose of having a heightened possibility of experiencing God, so we may, as our mission statement says, be committed to sharing God's unconditional love with all.

Amen.